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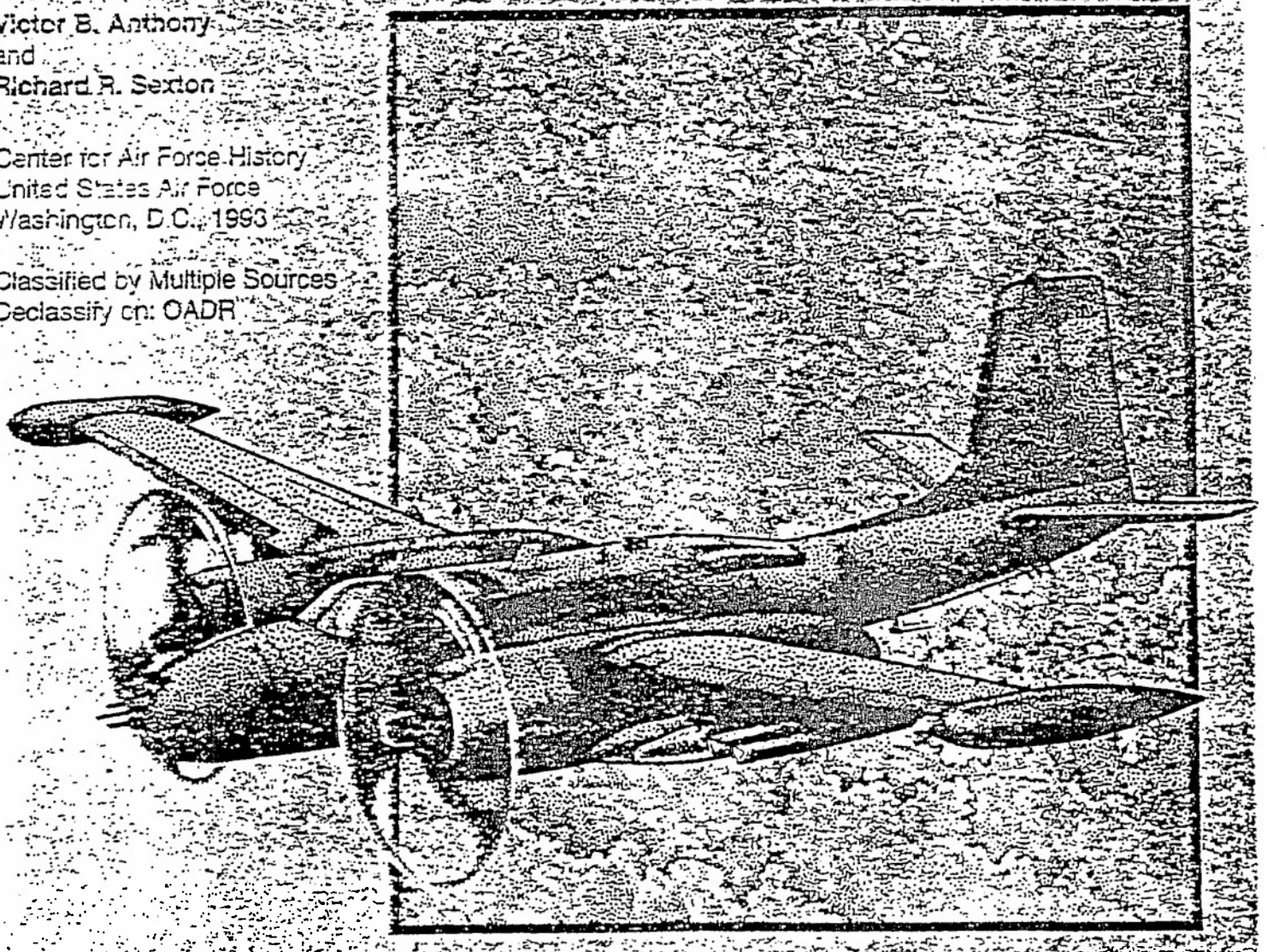
The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia

The War in Northern Laos 1954 - 1973

Victor B. Anthony
and
Richard R. Sexton

Center for Air Force History
United States Air Force
Washington, D.C., 1993

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Foreword

(U) *The War in Northern Laos, 1954–1973*, is one of three volumes concerned with the war in Laos that will be published in the Center for Air Force History's *United States Air Force in Southeast Asia* series. Two volumes, *Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos, 1960–1968*, by Jacob Van Staaveren, and *Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos, 1968–1972*, by Bernard C. Nalty, describe Air Force activities in southern Laos; this volume covers the north over the total period. The two areas of Laos, north and south, had vastly different types of conflicts. Interdiction of supplies and personnel flowing down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North to South Vietnam took precedence in the south, while the Air Force, in the north, directly aided the government of Laos with training and military assistance, as well as with missions supporting ground forces engaged in conflict.

(U) The war in northern Laos was complex and confusing, with three separate factions contending for power and territory. The 1954 Geneva Agreements on Laos recognized Laos as a neutral state but prohibited it from forming military alliances with other governments. The Royal Laotian Army in 1955 numbered around ten thousand, but the French, who trained the army before 1955, had not allowed Laotian officers in positions of authority. The Laotian Army Air Force, an air force in name only, was a small section of two hundred. As the United States struggled to overcome these deficiencies, because the Geneva accords prevented establishment of bases or even advisory groups, subterfuge and deception became common, and the irregular forces often were the most effective and determined. Finally, because of the Geneva restrictions, the U.S. ambassador in Vientiane evolved as the final authority on any overt Air Force action, an inefficient and difficult situation that persisted throughout the entire period of U.S. assistance to Laos. This book describes the triumphs, frustrations, and failures of the Air Force in northern Laos between January 1955, when the United States Operations Mission began to coordinate military aid, and April 1973, when B–52s and F–111s flew the last bombing sorties over northern Laos.

(U) Two officers assigned to the Office of Air Force History wrote *The War in Northern Laos*. Maj. Victor B. Anthony, author of the Introduction and first eight chapters, is a graduate of the Citadel and has an MA in history from Duke University. Major Anthony also wrote the study "Tactics and Techniques of Night Operations in Southeast Asia" during his assignment to the Office of Air Force History. Lt. Col. Richard R. Sexton, a graduate of the Air Force Academy, authored the final eight chapters and the Epilogue. He has an MA in history from the University of California, Davis, and an MA in International Relations from the University of Southern California. Both authors are Master Navigators and both were instructors in the History Department at the Air Force Academy. Following Colonel Sexton's departure in 1979, Col. John Schlight, then Chief of the Special Histories Branch, Office of Air Force History, combined the two manuscripts and organized the book into its present form.

RICHARD P. HALLION
Air Force Historian

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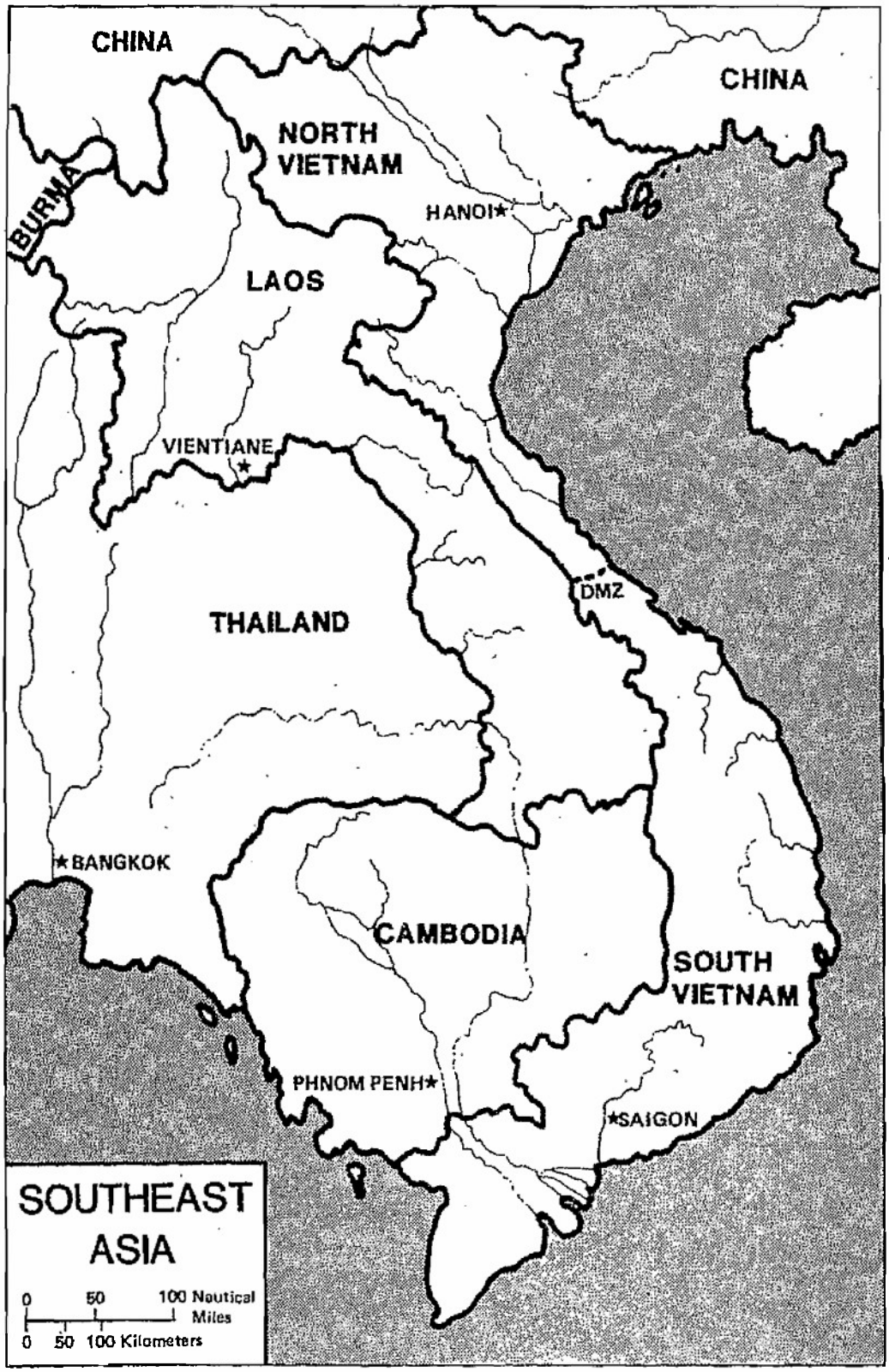
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Introduction

Prelude to U.S. Involvement (U)

(U) Laos—known as the Land of the Million Elephants and White Parasol by its pleasant and easy-going people—is a primitive, thinly populated, land-locked country lying in the north-central portion of Indochina. With roughly the same area as Oregon, approximately ninety-one thousand square miles, and a population of just under three million people, Laos is the most sparsely settled country in Southeast Asia. Resembling a pork chop in shape, its mountainous northern border is shared with Burma and China. The Annamite Mountains separate Laos from Vietnam on the east, and Cambodia and Thailand bound the country on the south and west, respectively. About two-thirds of the land consists of rugged, jungle-covered mountains, limestone karsts, and broad plateaus, an area very suitable for guerrilla operations. Few roads penetrate this remote area, and a modern army is faced with severe logistic problems.

(U) Most of the people live in the remainder of the country, the fertile valley of the Mekong River, Asia's fourth largest river, which flows through the northwestern part of the country and forms a part of its western boundary. The Mekong serves as the major artery for commerce between Laos and the outside world, and the country's major populated areas nestle along its banks.

(U) Everyday life in Laos is chiefly regulated by the monsoon seasons. The rains of the southwest monsoon arrive in May and stay until mid-October. During these five months, the roads puddle, pothole, and rut, becoming largely unusable. Streams swell and overflow their banks, inundating large areas and sweeping away rickety wooden bridges. The highest water level is reached in early November after the rains have ceased. Lush jungle growth appears, and the multicanopied trees shut off any view from the air over wide areas. Insects swarm in clouds, while armies of leeches wait on shrubs to be brushed onto unwary victims. In short, the June to December period is characterized by quagmires of ooze, flooded roads, and dense foliage.[1]

(U) The dry season, during the northeast monsoon, lasts from November to February and brings clear skies, little rain, and cool nights. As the soil dries and cracks, the smaller streams turn to trickles. These streams no longer obstruct traffic, having dried to a series of moss-covered puddles; and traffic picks up along the roadways, tracks, and trails.

(U) A two-month hot season follows the northeast monsoon, with temperatures rising well above one hundred degrees. With the high humidity, the heat is stifling. The bamboo jungles turn yellow and drop their foliage, covering the ground with a carpet of crackling leaves. This is the time when the mountain tribes slash and burn new farming plots, and the fires often reach for miles, spreading an extensive belt of smoky haze that may rise as high as ten thousand feet.

(U) Historically, Laos has often been portrayed as a remote fantasy land that, until the 1960s, slept like Rip Van Winkle. On the contrary, because of its geographic location and sparse population, throughout most of its history Laos has been battered between the rival empires of Vietnam and Thailand, serving as a buffer or a battleground for its stronger and more populous neighbors. In fact, an early U.S. analysis described Laos as a "pawn of destiny."[2] These powerful

1. (U) MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, Aug 61; Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (London, 1968), p 44.
2. (U) Douglas S. Blaufarb, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional Warfare in Laos, 1962–1970* (R–919–ARPA,

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neighbors not only invaded the country, but often divided it among themselves. The only time the Laotians maintained any degree of autonomy was during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, in the early eighteenth century, the heirs to the throne quarreled and the region was split into three separate states—the Kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak. The royal bickering continued, and it was not long before Thai and Vietnamese overlords resumed their domination of Laos.

(U) In 1826, the Thai occupied Vientiane and annexed Champassak outright. Two years later they deposed the ruler of Vientiane, leveled the town, and deported one third of the population to Thailand. (Among the spoils of war was the priceless Emerald Buddha that was carried back to Bangkok.) The Vietnamese emperor, fearful of Thai expansion, countered these moves by annexing Xieng Khouang and sending an army to occupy the Plain of Jars.[3] Only Luang Prabang, Bangkok's ally in the recent war, retained its nominal independence. During the next few years, the Thai and Vietnamese skirmished frequently, but all-out war was averted. By the 1850s, however, the Vietnamese, more concerned with the arrival of the French in Southeast Asia, withdrew their soldiers from Laos to meet this new threat. As Vietnamese influence waned in northern Laos, the Thai gradually strengthened their hold on the Laotian states.[4]

(U) During the first half of the twentieth century, Laos was diverse ethnically and culturally. The population was a mixture of races, religions, tribes, and clans who frequently regarded each other with suspicion and hostility. Nearly 55 percent of the people were ethnic Lao, a race closely related to the Thai. The Lao were predominately Buddhist and lived in the river valleys where they practiced wet-field, or paddy, farming. Rice was the principal crop, although some fruit and vegetables were produced. The main source of protein was fish, supplemented by beef, pork, and poultry. In basic attitudes, the Lao were peaceful, easy going, and not aggressive. The traditional social structure consisted of peasant and elite classes. The elite class was made up of family and clan groupings with a regional basis. These various groups, rather than the nation, commanded the loyalty of the individual peasant. At the center, power was carefully balanced among the elite, who saw government service primarily as an arena to compete for influence and a means to advance clan or family interests. As a result, the government's ability to influence events outside its capital depended on the concurrence of local political chieftains.

(U) Primitive mountain tribes and a small foreign community composed the non-Lao population. Most of the tribesmen practiced slash-and-burn dry rice farming and were animists, or spirit worshipers. Hunting, fishing, and some vegetable gardening supplemented the basic rice diet. The largest group was the Kha, a Mon-Khmer people of many small tribes dispersed throughout central and southern Laos. Little ethnic or social awareness existed among these tribes, personal loyalty rarely extending beyond the village elders. The Yao and Meo, relative latecomers to Laos, had migrated from China in about 1850. More ethnically conscious than the Kha, they had a loose political organization based on subtribes and clans. The Yao became vassals of the royal house of Luang Prabang in the northwest, while the Meo became aligned with the nobles of Xieng Khouang in the northeast. The Ho and Kho, Tibetan-Burmese tribes,

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Santa Monica, 1972), pp X, 2–3, 75–76; EOTR, Col Robert S. Ferrari, USA, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, May 27, 1968, pp 24–34.

3. (U) The Plain of Jars, technically the Tranninh Plateau, is located in the center of northern Laos. It is a high, rolling plain about thirty-six hundred feet above sea level and is surrounded by even higher mountains. The popular name, often shortened to PDJ from the French *Plaine des Jarres*, is derived from the one hundred or so stone jars strewn about a meadow near the center of the plain. The jars are large enough to hold a small man in a squatting position and are thought to be funeral urns. Tests have placed their age at two thousand years and their origin as Chinese.

4. (U) Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, pp 456–59; Maj Louis Seig, USAF, *Impact of Geography on Air Operations in SEA* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1970); Lt Col Philip R. Harrison, USAF, *Impact of Darkness and Weather on Air Operations in SEA* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1969).

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occupied the extreme northwest. Like the Yao and Meo, their political structure was loose. The tribal Thao, scattered over northern Laos, were the most socially and culturally advanced of the hill people. Although ethnically related to the Lao and Siamese Thai, they maintained their own distinct tribal composition. The small foreign community, mostly businessmen and tradesmen, lived chiefly in the urban areas. The Lao generally accepted foreigners, but regarded the hill tribes as racially inferior and viewed them with hostility and suspicion. This was especially true of the warlike Meo. ("Meo," for example, means "savage" in Lao, while "Kha" denotes a slave.)[5]

The French interest in Southeast Asia had been generated by a desire to find a back door to China that would avoid the British-dominated ports of Hong Kong and Shanghai. Vietnam appeared to offer such a route; and by 1883, the French had established a protectorate over that empire. Alarmed at this turn of events and fearful that France would reassert Vietnamese claims to Laos, the Thai launched a large-scale expedition into northern Laos in 1885. They occupied the Plain of Jars, Xieng Khouang, Samneua, and parts of present-day Vietnam. Negotiations with the French followed and the Thai agreed to accept a French vice consul at Luang Prabang. Since consulates functioned solely in foreign cities, this seemed to signify French recognition of Thai claims to northern Laos. Still, the Thai soon had cause to regret their action as the French appointed the energetic explorer/diplomat, Auguste J. M. Pavie, as their consul.[6]

Today, Pavie is called the Father of Modern Laos, a title well deserved. Four months after his arrival in Luang Prabang, the rainy season began and the Thai troops guarding the province withdrew to the south. Undefended, the kingdom was attacked by Chinese bandits[7] who burned and looted the royal capital. Pavie managed to spirit away the aged king and the grateful monarch was persuaded to place himself under French protection, thus beginning French colonial rule in Laos. Two years later, Pavie convinced several other chieftains to accept French protection. The French then revived the old Vietnamese claims to the area. Grudgingly, the Thai gave in, and Pavie personally received Thailand's renunciation of the northern provinces at Dien Bien Phu.

Even so, France's imperialistic appetite had not been satisfied—only whetted. By 1890, the French were claiming territory west of the Mekong. The Thai resisted and border clashes ensued. Finally, in 1893, three French gunboats blockaded Bangkok. This move alarmed the British, who wanted to maintain Thailand as a buffer between their own possessions in Burma and India and the French colonial empire in Vietnam. Tension increased, but war was averted when the British urged Thailand to accept French terms. Squeezed between the two European powers, the Thai had no choice. A new treaty severed the west bank of the Mekong from Thailand and joined it to Laos. In return, the French guaranteed Thai independence; but subsequent conventions in 1902, 1904, and 1907 added more territory to French Indochina.

In part, French ambitions in Laos were simply an attempt to acquire as much territory as possible before the British could get it; the country, of itself, offered no economic or military benefits. At the same time, the French wished to restrain Thai influence along the Mekong, an influence the French felt would jeopardize their more valuable possessions in Vietnam. Thus, French rule in Laos was directed primarily toward using the area as a buffer between Thailand and Vietnam.[8]

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5. Bernard B. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960–1961* (Garden City, N.Y., 1969), pp 25–27; Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization* (New York, 1964), pp 1–10; Frank M. LeBar and Adrienne Suddard, eds, *Laos: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven, 1960), pp 14–16; John K. Whitmore, "The Thai-Vietnamese Struggle for Laos in the Nineteenth Century," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, eds: Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (New York, 1970), pp 56–65; Toye, pp 32–34.

6. Alfred W. McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, pp 68–70; Toye, pp 27–35; Dommen, p 10.

7. Actually soldiers who had fled China when the T'aip'ing rebellion was crushed in 1864. They settled in northern Laos and Vietnam and turned to banditry.

8. Dommen, pp 9–15; Toye, pp 39–41.

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The War in Northern Laos

The boundary between French Laos and Vietnam was based on the Mekong watershed. Such boundaries served the needs of cartographers and politicians, but meant little to the inhabitants. While the Lao accounted for 55 percent of the total population in Laos, six to seven times more Lao lived in Thailand; and as many Meo were dwelling in northern Vietnam as in Laos. (Still other Meo were in Burma and Thailand or had remained in southern China.) The French boundaries also ignored traditional political alignments. For example, Phong Saly and Samneua, which had never been under Lao rule, became part of Laos, as did Sayaboury, which had always been governed from Bangkok. What the French hoped would be a clearly defined political unit became one of the most fragmented and ethnically complex in Southeast Asia. As long as the French ruled Indochina this was of little consequence; but when the French left in 1954, these boundaries—and the people's view of them—took on new significance.[9]

Administratively, the French divided the country into fourteen provinces under a governor at Vientiane, who reported to the governor general in Hanoi. Because Laos was considered the backward part of Indochina, its colonial staff was kept to a bare minimum. In 1902, it numbered just seventy-two officials—the smallest in the French empire. With such a limited bureaucracy, the French found it convenient to preserve the existing structure of local government and avoided upsetting custom and tradition wherever possible. For example, the monarch at Luang Prabang was permitted to keep his throne as Pavie had promised. He retained all the outward trappings of government, but in reality, the French ruled the province. The French also appointed district officers, but lower officials were selected by the villagers based on traditional clan loyalties.[10]

In contrast to Vietnam, the French did very little in the way of educating the average Lao, a people they considered childlike, happy-go-lucky, even indolent. In 1907, they decided that two to three years of religious and educational training by a Buddhist priest in the local temple would suffice. In the larger towns and villages, secular schools were built, although staffed almost entirely by Vietnamese teachers. Soon, the latter's dependents in these schools outnumbered the Laotians two to one. Thus, education reached only the very few; in 1940, there were only seven thousand primary school students in a population of one million.

The elite of Laos fared much better. Many studied at the Lycee Pavie in Vientiane under French teachers, with the most promising graduates being sent to Hanoi and then to Paris for further education. However, when these better-educated Laotians returned to their native land, they often had to take menial jobs, with Vietnamese immigrants filling the positions they sought because the French actively encouraged Vietnamese immigration into Laos. At the turn of the century, the Red River delta had a population density of fifteen hundred people per square kilometer (0.4 square mile); in Laos, the average density was only four. At the end of World War II, an estimated fifty thousand Vietnamese lived in Laos. There were two results of this French policy: first, Vietnamese colonies sprang up throughout Laos and the traditional Lao distrust for the "people from the other side of the mountains" was intensified. Second, too few native administrators were trained to hold positions of responsibility. This deficiency was to make itself felt after full independence was reached and for years afterward.[11]

Although the French dominated the lowland Lao, they could never control the fiercely independent Meo. These warrior-farmers had appropriated the mountains of northeastern Laos, where the opium poppy was their main agricultural product. As long as they were not abused or mistreated, the Meo were willing to pay taxes to the French on the opium derived from these

9. Toye, pp 47–48; McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," pp 75–77.
10. McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," pp 78–79.
11. *Ibid*, pp 82–83; LeBar and Suddard, *Laos*, p 17; Sisouk Na Champassak, *Storm Over Laos: A Contemporary History* (New York, 1961), pp 4–7, 14–15, 24–25; Toye, p 45.

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poppies.[12] The French, however, often used Lao administrators who regarded the Meo as savages and racially inferior. Lao demands grew excessive; and in 1919, the tribes revolted and proclaimed an independent Meo kingdom in Xieng Khouang Province. When Lao militia failed to quell the rebellion, regular French troops were called in. By 1921, the secession movement had been crushed, but the simmering resentment of the mountain people was later exploited by the Viet Minh following World War II.[13]

Economically, the French did little for Laos. There were some improvements in poppy growing; but self-supporting village agriculture, in which 90 percent of the population engaged, was virtually untouched. Few attempts were made to improve the production of rice and maize, the country's main food crops. Even though the French experimented with coffee and rubber plantations on the Bolovens Plateau, these ventures were usually underfinanced or lacked the skilled labor to harvest the product. The six thousand workers of the one tin mine were Vietnamese and French, and the lode eventually petered out.[14]

One of the more grandiose schemes to stimulate trade during the colonial period was construction of a road network in Laos linking it with Vietnam. For centuries, the natural route for Laotian commerce (what there was of it) had been on footpaths between villages or down the Mekong and across northeast Thailand to Bangkok. Such traffic, beneficial to Thailand (and the British), could not be tolerated by the French. Using corvee labor drawn from the populace, French engineers and Vietnamese technicians built three major "highways." Route 13 was the chief north-south connection between the major towns along the Mekong. Route 7 was the main east-west road in the north, cutting across the Plain of Jars and entering Vietnam via the Barthelemy Pass. In the panhandle, Route 9 originated at the Mekong town of Savannakhet, ran eastward through Tchepone and Khe Sanh, and ended on the coast of South Vietnam. None of the roads were passable during the rainy season and, until the 1960s, carried little traffic. Plans for a railway between the seacoast and the Mekong valley never materialized.[15]

In summary, Laos was much the same on the eve of World War II as when Auguste Pavie first set foot on its soil over fifty years earlier. The country was still a backward, inaccessible, and undeveloped hinterland compared to bustling Vietnam, which boasted a costly rail network, an elaborate highway system, schools, universities, and impressive colonial administrative centers. Laos had none of these and remained Indochina's stepchild.

The outbreak of World War II signaled the beginning of the end of France's Southeast Asia empire. A few days after her defeat by Germany, France gave Japan rights to use airfields and to station troops in Indochina. The French civil service and army that were loyal to Marshal Philippe Petain's Vichy government were allowed to remain and function, provided they did not interfere with the Japanese. The Thai subsequently signed a treaty of friendship with Tokyo and immediately occupied portions of Luang Prabang province and the lands west of the Mekong.[16]

Realizing it might be just a matter of time before they lost all of Laos to Thailand, the French belatedly moved to develop nationalism. They reorganized the colonial administration, appointing Laotians to better positions with higher pay. The Kingdom of Luang Prabang was enlarged to encompass all of northern Laos. Two Lao infantry companies (chasseurs) were raised and made part of the colonial army. More schools and hospitals were opened in the

12. The opium trade was so lucrative that it became a monopoly of the Indochina government, generating one-seventh of its income. However, the long, difficult borders of Laos also made it ideal for smuggling nonregulated opium out of the country—a practice continued right through the American involvement in Southeast Asia.
13. Dommen, pp 5, 16–17; McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," pp 79–80, 91–92.
14. McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," p 84.
15. *Ibid*, p 83; Dommen, p 14.
16. Toye, pp 55–57.

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lowlands; but little was done for the mountain tribes, the Lao being extremely reluctant to share their newfound political and social status with people they deemed inferior.[17]

For three years the Japanese and Vichy French jointly administered Indochina in a sort of live-and-let-live agreement. When American forces invaded the Philippines in October 1944, Japan sent reinforcements to Vietnam as a precaution against an invasion there. The French realized their position was becoming more precarious each day. Many subordinate military officers had previously contacted the Free French mission in Kunming, China. It was agreed that if the Japanese began to remove the French, the garrisons would retreat into the mountains and become partisans. The Free French mission further contacted some Meo hill tribes, the only people considered effective mountain guerrillas. French commandos parachuted in from China, bringing modern weapons and supplies, and began organizing the tribes.[18]

In early March 1945, the Japanese decided to end French rule. They quickly arrested members of the civil government throughout Vietnam, replacing them with Japanese or loyal Vietnamese. Military garrisons were attacked and while some troops escaped into China, most were captured and imprisoned. Only a few reached the mountains where they joined the Meo and the commandos. The Japanese then informed the rulers of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that they were now independent nations within Japan's new order. The Laotians, however, proclaimed their loyalty to the French. Such brashness did not sit well with the Japanese. They sent troops on a sixteen-day forced march from Vinh to Luang Prabang and compelled King Sisavang Vong to backtrack and declare Laos independent. To ensure the monarch's continued compliance, Crown Prince Savang Vatthana was sent back to Saigon as a hostage. Prince Boun Oum, hereditary heir of the house of Champassak (and later prime minister of Laos) elected to continue the fight. With French military help, he set up a guerrilla base in southern Laos and spent the last few months of the war harassing Japanese lines of communication. Prince Phetsarath,[19] viceroy and prime minister since 1941, was careful not to antagonize the Japanese further. Convinced the Laotians would give them no more trouble, the Japanese merely appointed "advisors" to his administration. The prince, however, saw a golden opportunity to prepare Laos for independence. One of his first acts under the Japanese was to remove many Vietnamese from the civil service and replace them with Laotian.[20]

Meanwhile, the remainder of the French colonial force scattered into the mountains where they organized small guerrilla bands. Their function was not to harass or attack the Japanese, but to gather intelligence and serve as a reminder to the Laotian people that France had not abandoned them. More important, they were to be the nucleus for reestablishing French rule following Japan's defeat.[21]

Prince Phetsarath had other ideas. When the war ended and the French commissioner tried to return in late August 1945, he was told that he no longer had any authority in Laos and

17. *Ibid*, pp 58, 61–63; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: The Reorganization of the Lao Armed Forces, Apr 1, 1968.

18. Toye, pp 63–64; McCoy, "French Colonialism in Laos," pp 96–97.

19. Prince Phetsarath was a member of the cadet or junior branch of the royal family. Although its members were rich and well educated, their wealth did not approach that of the great families of Vientiane or Champassak. For nearly 150 years, the cadet branch furnished the Viceroy or "second king" at Luang Prabang. As spiritual leader, the king reigned, but the Viceroy ruled the country. Phetsarath was educated in Saigon and Hanoi and, at fifteen, was sent to the Colonial College for French Administrators in Paris. He spent a year at Oxford University in England before returning to Luang Prabang in 1918. His younger brother, Prince Souvanna Phouma, became Prime Minister of Laos; and his younger half brother, Prince Souphanouvong, became leader of the Pathet Lao. [Dommen, pp 19–20.]

20. Toye, pp 64–66.

21. Nina S. Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries: The Lao Search for Independence, 1945–1954," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, pp 104–05.

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that the declaration of independence from the previous April was still valid. Two weeks later (September 15, 1945), Phetsarath, backed by a coalition of independence groups, unilaterally declared the Kingdoms of Luang Prabang and Champassak united. He did not receive the support of the king or crown prince, however, nor of Prince Boun Oum. In fact, Phetsarath soon received a telegram from the king stripping him of his powers. On October 12, 1945, Phetsarath's group reaffirmed independence, adopted a provisional constitution, and nominated a government known as Lao Issara (Free Laos). A second petition for recognition failed, and on October 20, the assembly took the drastic step of voting to depose King Sisavang.[22]

In the interim, Prince Souphanouvong, Phetsarath's younger half-brother, moved north with troops to support the provisional government. After his return from France in 1937, the prince had married a Vietnamese woman. He spent the war in Vietnam, where he made contact with the Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh. When the Lao Issara declared independence, Souphanouvong approached Ho for aid, and the latter directed his followers in central Vietnam to render the prince all possible assistance. At Hue he was given an armed escort of fifty soldiers—the first instance of Viet Minh support for the Laotian national movement. These troops arrived in Vientiane around November 1, augmented by some mountain tribes and immigrant Vietnamese recruited at Savannakhet and Thakhek, towns on the Mekong River that were heavily populated with Vietnamese. Although suspicious of Souphanouvong and his Vietnamese "army," the Lao Issara decided to broaden its political base. Souphanouvong was made minister of national defense and chief of the armed forces. Since the new government's strength did not exceed more than a few hundred men, such titles were titular niceties.[23]

The French, however, were already tightening the noose on the embryonic national movement. The colonial troops that fled to China the previous year were rearmed, and Sayaboury Province was retaken in February 1946. French forces from Saigon pushed over the mountains and easily occupied Champassak. At Thakhek, Souphanouvong's men made their stand and, after a bitter fight, were defeated. The prince was wounded and fled across the Mekong to Thailand. The French then advanced north, occupying Vientiane on April 24 and Luang Prabang on May 13, temporarily ending the independence movement. Phetsarath and his younger brother, Prince Souvanna Phouma, along with some two thousand of their followers, joined Souphanouvong and the remnants of his small army in exile.[24]

In Bangkok, the Lao Issara suffered a split following Souphanouvong's return from Hanoi after a mid-1946 meeting with Ho Chi Minh. The prince advocated renewing the war with the French and merging the Lao Issara and Viet Minh efforts. His colleagues balked. Like most Laotians, they harbored a historical distrust and fear of the Vietnamese. Furthermore, being in exile gave the group a chance to reflect on their positions. Phetsarath now favored an independent Laos under French protection while Souvanna still wanted full independence. At one time, Phetsarath protested that he was not anti-French and that he was too old to learn Chinese or English. All he desired was for France to realize times had changed. Neither brother could reconcile himself to the virulent anti-French position of Souphanouvong. When the gulf widened, they removed him as minister of defense of what was left of the rebel forces. Now estranged from his brothers, Souphanouvong followed the lead of Ho Chi Minh and retreated into the mountains of eastern Laos with a small group of followers. (Ho, unprepared for war, had fled into the mountains in 1946 after hostilities broke out between France and the Viet Minh). Aided by the Viet Minh with rice, money, and arms, Souphanouvong set about organizing a new power base.[25]

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22. [redacted] *Ibid*, pp 107–08; Dommen, pp 12–23.
23. [redacted] Dommen, pp 23–24; Tran Van Dinh, "The Birth of the Pathet Lao Army," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, p 425.
24. [redacted] Dommen, pp 25, 27; Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries," p 109.
25. [redacted] Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries," pp 104–114; Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 42; Sisouk, pp 16–17.

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The War in Northern Laos

In June 1946, the French established a joint Franco-Laotian commission to discuss further relations between the two countries. Eventually a constitutional convention convened and on May 11, 1946, King Sisavang produced a new constitution. Laos was declared a constitutional monarchy under the ruling house of Luang Prabang with political, economic, and military matters remaining with the French. However, very few of the Lao Issara exiles were sufficiently impressed with constitutional developments to return home. To them, the new constitution was nothing more than a facade for the French to continue colonialism. In 1949, another convention granted the Laotians more independence. The king then sent a message to the exiles granting amnesty. They accepted, then voted to dissolve the Lao Issara and go back to Laos. Phetsarath could not return because his attempted coup against the royal family had made his position untenable. He withdrew completely from political life and lived as a recluse in Bangkok, Thailand, until the king granted him a pardon in 1957, allowing him to return home.[26]

In the meantime, the French sought to regain control of Vietnam. Laos was scarcely affected by this struggle until March 1953, when the Viet Minh forces crossed into Laos and occupied Samneua. Souphanouvong came with them, heading an independence movement known as the Pathet Lao (Lao Country). Using the classic peasant revolution of Mao Tse-tung, coupled with his own dynamic personality, Souphanouvong gained power in eastern Laos. Soon, the greater part of Phong Saly and Samneua Provinces, plus a wide belt of mountain territory, was in his hands. The royal government retained its hold on the lowlands; but with so many Vietnamese immigrants living in these areas, its grip was tenuous at best.

Taking advantage of the situation, the communists moved south to the Plain of Jars where the reinforced French and Lao were waiting. Now in the open, the Viet Minh were thrown back by artillery and air strikes. From the valley of Dien Bien Phu, a second enemy column spearheaded to within seven miles of Luang Prabang, only to be ambushed and repulsed.[27] Two days later, heavy monsoon rains made large scale military operations in the mountains impossible. Nevertheless, the weather was clear on the Mekong River, and on Christmas Day 1953, the Viet Minh took Thakhek, cutting Laos in half. The seesaw battle that ensued lasted until February 1954 before the communists were finally pushed back into the jungle. The French reacted by seizing the base at Dien Bien Phu to protect the approaches to Laos and to draw the Viet Minh into another set piece battle and destroy them. After an epic fifty-six-day siege, the garrison of the base surrendered on May 7, 1954, effectively ending French rule in all of Indochina.[28] During the colonial period of France (1885–1954) that ended, for all practical purposes, at Dien Bien Phu, the French had superimposed their own bureaucratic system on Laos, but they had done little to change the underlying social fabric. This absence of national cohesion made Laos a ready target for communist subversion and would prove to be a major obstacle to American efforts to build a viable noncommunist government.

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26. Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries," pp 115–16.

27. Gen. Raul Salan, commander of French forces in Indochina, was forced to defend Luang Prabang because the aged king refused to leave. "The Vietnamese did not succeed in taking Luang Prabang when they attacked us in 1479," the king told Salan. "Neither will they succeed this time." Accordingly, the French and Laotians prepared to defend the city, hastily erecting bunkers and stringing miles of barbed wire. Then, suddenly, the Laotians quit working and a holiday atmosphere pervaded the city. When the French commander asked the governor for an explanation, he was told that a venerable Buddhist priest had predicted the Vietnamese would not capture the city. Hence, the people saw little sense in completing the defenses. The fact that the Vietnamese were turned back gave more credence to the priest's magical powers. [Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, pp 53–54.]

28. Dommen, pp 39–43; Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia, 1967), pp 456–59.

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PART I:

A DECADE OF DISTANT SUPPORT (U)

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Chapter I

Early American Involvement (U)

On April 24, 1954, two weeks before the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the major powers began meeting in Geneva. The discussions centered on Korea, but at French insistence, Indochina was included on the agenda. On May 8, the day after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the French proposed a cease-fire for all of Indochina. Although Dien Bien Phu had only been a battle, Vietnamese control of the Tonkin region and public opinion back home forced the French government to concede. The cease-fire proposal was accepted and political settlements followed.[1]

For Laos, the 1954 Geneva accords specified an end to hostilities and the withdrawal of all foreign troops, except for five thousand French defense and training forces. An International Control Commission (ICC) consisting of India, Poland, and Canada, with India as chairman, was to supervise the withdrawal and cease-fire provisions. Integration of all elements of the population "into the national community" was to take place. This provision, aimed at the Pathet Lao, which controlled Samneua and Phong Saly Provinces, was too vague and general to afford a realistic framework for a political settlement. The great powers further agreed that Laos would become a neutral state, a buffer between Thailand and Vietnam. Laos was enjoined from entering into any military alliance and from seeking foreign military aid, materiel, or personnel, except for maintaining territorial defense. These stipulations did not abrogate France's obligation to defend Laos from foreign aggression nor did they affect military and economic agreements negotiated between the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) and the United States in 1950. Under the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with France and the Associated States of Indochina (the "Pentalateral Agreement"), the United States furnished extensive military and financial aid to France during its war against the Viet Minh. Signed at Saigon on December 23, 1950, this pact was between the United States, France, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia.[2]

Officially, the United States refused to sign the Geneva accords. Unofficially, it agreed to respect them if everyone else did. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles placed little faith in communist promises and soon began laying the groundwork for a collective defense treaty for the area. In September 1954, representatives of Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, France, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and the United States met at Manila and formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). One of the treaty's chief provisos was that the signatories would view an armed attack on Laos as an attack upon themselves. Thus Laos—neither represented nor consulted at the conference and forbidden from entering into any alliance by the Geneva agreements—suddenly found itself under SEATO's protection. Following the signing of the SEATO treaty, Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff their views on what size Laotian armed forces the United States could support.[3]

Prior to Dien Bien Phu, the Royal Laotian Army (RLA) numbered around ten thousand but was trained more along the lines of a constabulary than an army. With French policy that no native officer would lead troops larger than a company, French officers commanded most units.

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1. Ernest Gruening and Herbert W. Beaser, *Vietnam Folly* (Washington, 1968), pp 111–14.
2. Toye, pp 97–97; Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 62; Marek Thee, "Background Notes on the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Laos and the Vietnam Agreements of 1956–57," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, pp 122–23.
3. Toye, pp 89–101.

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The War in Northern Laos

To the French, the Laotians did not have what it takes to make good soldiers. The result was a very small indigenous officer corps. Now, after Geneva, the French presence was reduced, and Laotian officers were suddenly catapulted into command positions for which they had scant preparation or experience. To fill these vacancies, noncommissioned officers were promoted to company grade officers and company-grade officers to field grade, while many of the general-officer billets were filled by commissioning directly from civilian life. These men had little or no competence to command and lacked that mysterious but important military ingredient called esprit de corps. Moreover, most of the overnight promotions and appointments to the general officer ranks were made on the basis of family and political connections. Hence, the allegiance of most of the officer corps was not to the army or constitution, but to the various local political leaders and groups to whom they owed their commissions. Under such circumstances, a Laotian army would be national in name only.[4] It was hardly an auspicious beginning.

The United States might possibly have begun correcting this condition had it been permitted to place a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in the country. Since the Geneva accords banned such an organization, only France could maintain bases and a military mission in Laos to train the Laotian Army. The U.S. programs and activities would be limited so long as the French retained this responsibility. Consequently, the Defense Department was reluctant to introduce military hardware while unable to carry out the provisions of the Mutual Security Act concerning supervision and maintenance of furnished equipment.[5]

Over and above these restrictions, the Joint Chiefs were confronted with the enormous deficiencies of Laos as a nation. Ninety percent illiterate,[6] the population was ill prepared for independence. Like the officer corps of the army, it needed the spirit of nationalism, patriotism, loyalty to country, and other ideals accepted by Americans as basic. The loyalty of the Laotian peasants centered on their clans or villages, not Vientiane. They were usually ignorant of, indifferent to, or antagonistic toward a government run by a few aristocratic, French-educated families. To mold an army from such raw material would be a long and arduous task. Under such conditions, it is no wonder the chiefs recommended against any force levels whatever for Laos.[7]

Nevertheless, the State Department wanted to build the Laotian army to 23,500 men, justifying its position on the belief that the army could be a primary force for nation building and modernization and, more important, as a bulwark against Russian or Chinese communism. Considering the makeup of the RLA, such a conclusion seemed far fetched and the Joint Chiefs stuck to their guns. Thus, an early difference of opinion arose over what was militarily feasible and politically expedient.

In January 1955, the Eisenhower administration began supporting the RLA with a direct cash subsidy of $34 million. This military aid, chiefly increased troop pay, was administered by the legation through the United States Operations Mission (USOM). The chiefs again were asked to approve a force for Laos, but their views remained unchanged. They did note, however, that they would support a standing army should "political considerations be overriding," meaning

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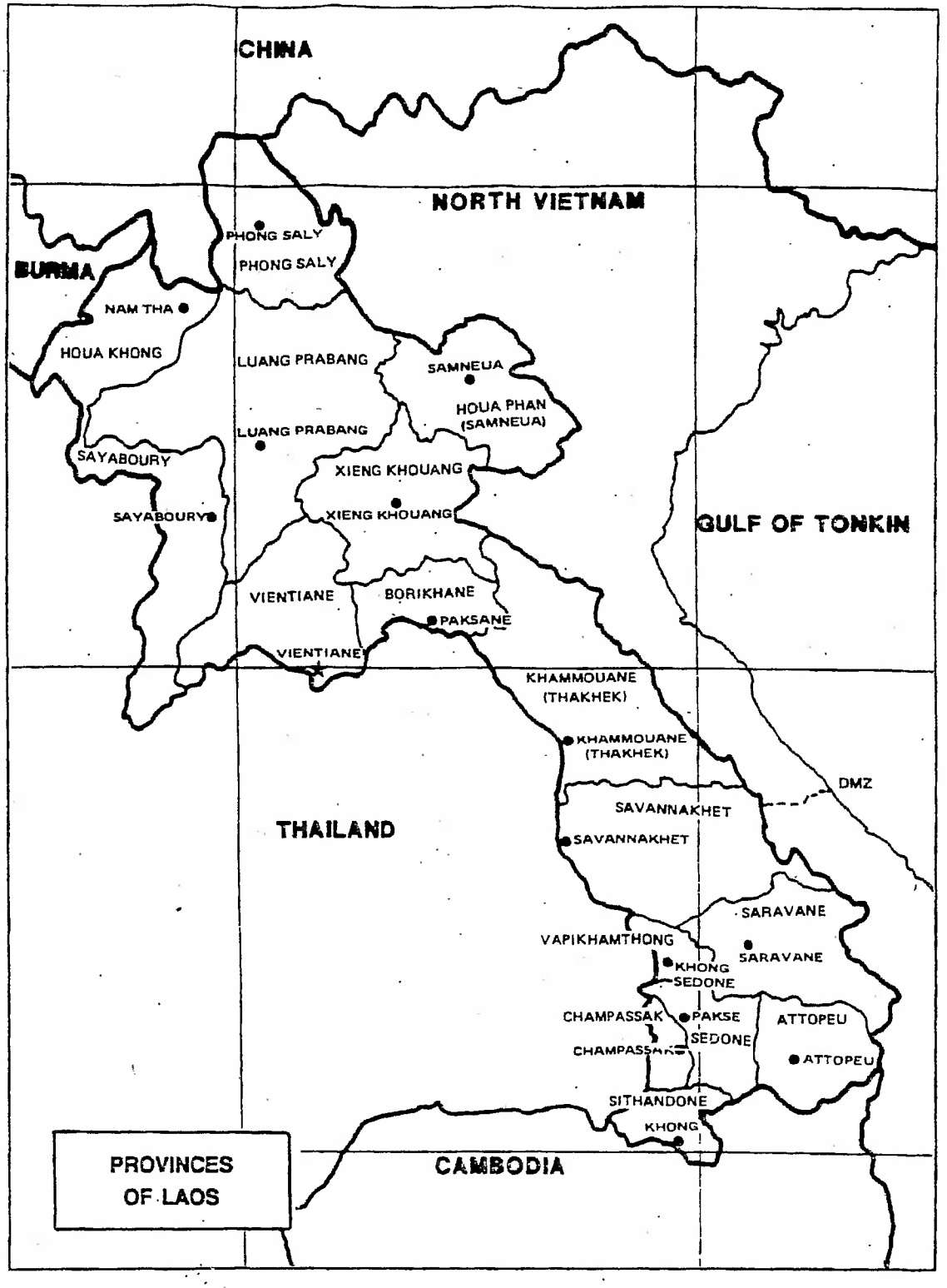
4. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, pp 47–49; Hearings before the Subcommittee on the Far East and the Pacific of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Military Security Program in Laos, 85th Cong, 2d sess (Washington, 1958), p 8; Ben R. Baldwin, *et al, Case Study of US Counterinsurgency Operations in Laos, 1955–1962* (McLean, Va., 1964), p 49 [hereafter cited as *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*]; Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967), p 117.

5. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p A–10; study, PEO, Missions and Functions of Programs Evaluation Office, n.d., atch to ltr, Rothwell H. Brown, CHPEO, to ASD/ISA, subj: Transmittal of Missions and Functions of Programs Evaluation Office, Sep 24, 1957 [hereafter cited as study, Missions and Functions of PEO].

6. When the U.S. Special Forces arrived in mid-1959, they discovered just seven college graduates in the Royal Army—all doctors and lawyers. It was estimated that only five percent of the entire army possessed three or more years of formal schooling. [Baldwin, p C-48.]

7. Hist Sum, Col Jack G. Cornett, USA, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, May 10, 1965.

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if the State Department believed it was in the best interest of the United States. Secretary of State Dulles had already reached that conclusion. Laos must be kept independent and out of the communist camp. Placing the kingdom under SEATO's protective umbrella had been a step in that direction; another would be expansion of the Royal Army, financed by the United States.[8]

(U) Meanwhile, political talks began on January 3, 1955, between the government and the Pathet Lao over Samneua and Phong Saly Provinces. The Geneva accords stipulated that the communist forces were to regroup in these areas, which would then be turned over to the RLG. Elections were to follow that summer. The Pathet Lao were reluctant to negotiate, fearing a diminution of their power in these provinces. They pressed forward with a permanent administration, including building schools and printing textbooks; and military recruiting and training were accelerated.[9] Despite their required withdrawal from Laos by the Geneva agreements, North Vietnamese military and political cadres stayed to serve as advisors and to fill certain technical posts. Within North Vietnam, a Pathet Lao training center and an officer candidate school were started at Son Tay. With each passing day, integration of the Pathet Lao was made more difficult. The ICC could give Vientiane but meager assistance, since the Pathet Lao rarely cooperated in the necessary inspections set forth in the Geneva accords; and on several occasions, they fired on ICC helicopters. The talks, which had been under way on the Plain of Jars, were temporarily suspended in April. Three months later, the Laotian government concluded a new agreement with the United States for greater aid and army expansion.[10]

(U) The United States now embarked on the monumental task of building and supplying an indigenous army of twenty-three thousand men from a rural society whose officers and men were poorly educated and trained and possessed little in the way of a military heritage. Such a program could not be handled by the USOM, and a MAAG was prohibited by the Geneva accords. Some way had to be found to circumvent these obstacles. In December 1955, a semicovert group known as the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) was set up as a section of USOM. In reality, this office was funded by the Defense Department and operated as a separate arm of the U.S. mission. The PEO somewhat resembled a MAAG and was able to meet the requirements of the Mutual Security Act concerning supervision and end use of military equipment furnished the Royal Laotian Government. The chief of the PEO, retired Army Brig. Gen. Rothwell H. Brown, advised the U.S. ambassador[11] on military matters and served as a member of the country team just as if he were MAAG chief. He also maintained a direct line of communication to the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) in Honolulu. Training of the RLA, however, continued to be the bailiwick of the fifteen hundred officers and men of the French Military Mission (FMM).[12]

(U) To keep some adherence to the Geneva agreements, the PEO was staffed by twelve retired and reservist U.S. military personnel in civilian status. Although the Royal Laotian Government approved the PEO, it frowned on members exposing themselves to public view. A low profile was adopted, a status that soon became a way of life for every American to serve in Laos.[13]

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8. (U) Dommen, pp 98–99; Toye, pp 110–11; Len E. Ackland, "No Place for Neutralism: The Eisenhower Administration and Laos," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, p 143.
9. (U) No reliable intelligence exists on the military strength of the Pathet Lao at this time. Estimates vary from a strength of fifteen hundred in August 1954 to six thousand by November 1957. [Sisouk, *Storm Over Laos*, pp 31, 34.]
10. (U) Dommen, p 79; Toye, pp 106–110; Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos*, RAND Corporation Research Studies (Cambridge, 1970), pp 62–63.
11. (U) The U.S. legation was upgraded to embassy status in May 1955. Charles W. Yost served as ambassador until June 22, 1956, when he was replaced by J. Graham Parsons.
12. (U) *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, pp 17–18; study, Missions and Functions of PEO.
13. (U) See note above.

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Early American Involvement

The Pathet Lao/RLG talks that had been discontinued in April 1955 resumed in July, only to be suspended again in September. The two northeastern provinces remained the stumbling blocks; but in December, the general elections (boycotted by the communists) took place in the ten provinces held by the government.

No political party gained a majority nor could a coalition be formed with the required two-thirds majority needed to seat a new government. Once more the assembly turned to Souvanna Phouma. Souvanna had first served as prime minister in November 1951 and was holding office when the Viet Minh invaded Laos in 1953. He later negotiated the final independence conventions with France. In March 1956, he pledged himself to bring about a national reconciliation. By August, he had convinced his half brother, Prince Souphanouvong, to return to Vientiane for further negotiations. On December 28, a provisional agreement was hammered out that called for an end to the sporadic fighting between RLA and Pathet Lao units and for a supplementary election to give the Pathet Lao a chance at assembly representation. Meantime, there would be a coalition government.[14]

In November 1957, Prince Souphanouvong agreed to hand over the disputed northeastern provinces, swear allegiance to the king, and enter into a government of "national unity" headed by Souvanna. Included in the agreement was a provision for new elections and the integration of fifteen hundred Pathet Lao troops into the RLA.[15] Unification was to prove a major sticking point, however.

The new elections were scheduled for May 1958. Prince Souphanouvong, in the interim, organized the Pathet Lao into a new political party called the *Neo Lao Hak Xat* (NLHX—Laotian Patriotic Front). He began campaigning under the banner of national unity and peace, while placing particular emphasis on the need to clean up the graft and corruption in Vientiane. When Phetsarath returned in March 1957, he stunned many Americans by declaring that he did not believe the Pathet Lao were communists and that "the greatest danger of communist subversion came . . . from the bad use of [U.S.] foreign aid." The influx of American aid money ($202 million during 1955–58) plus an inflated currency had resulted in considerable corruption within the Laotian government. Ambassador J. Graham Parsons became worried that the neglected back country would support Souphanouvong on such a platform, so he inaugurated a crash program of economic aid called Operation Booster Shot. Included among the ninety-odd civic action projects were well digging; irrigation and flood control dams; repairs of schools, temples, roads, and airfields; and construction of rural hospitals. The operations also called for the delivery of sizable amounts of food, medical, and construction supplies, which, because of the primitive nature of the rural road system, had to be airdropped.[16]

The Laotian Army Air Force (LAAF) could not offer the ambassador much help, for it had made only limited progress under French tutelage since its founding in 1955. In fact, "Laotian Army Air Force" was nothing more than a courtesy title accorded a small section (two hundred men) of the Royal Army operating a "fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants" air transport/taxi service. It had no combat aircraft, but only four Douglas C–47 Skytrain transports, nine Morane-Saulnier MS–500 Crickets, two de Havilland L–20 Beavers, and five Sikorsky H–19 Chickasaw helicopters. The Beavers and helicopters were based at Vientiane, Xieng Khouang, Samneua, and

14. [redacted] Toye, pp 111–12.
15. [redacted] *Ibid*, pp 112–13; Sisouk, pp 52–53; Roger M. Smith, "Laos," in *Government and Politics of Southeast Asia*, 2d ed, ed: George M. Kahin (Ithaca, 1964), p 543.
16. [redacted] Dommen, pp 107–8; Seventh Report by the Committee on Operations, House of Representatives, *United States Aid Operations in Laos*, June 15, 1959, House Report 546, 86th Cong, 1st sess (Washington, 1959), pp 45–46; Judith W. Cousins and Alfred W. McCoy, "Living It Up in Laos: Congressional Testimony on United States Aid to Laos in the 1950s," in *Laos: War and Revolution*, pp 341, 349. The monetary figures on U.S. aid are taken from an Agency for International Development table, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Laos, Fiscal Years 1955–63," in Dommen, p 104.

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Boun Neua, and were used chiefly to ferry the ICC. All ground crews and the six pilots were members of the FMM, although twelve Laotian pilots were then taking training in France and North Africa. When Laotian troops in the field needed air support in excess of the air arm's capability, civilian C–47s flown by Air Laos were chartered to fill the breach.[17]

(U) Other than Cambodia's, the airfields of Laos were the poorest in Southeast Asia; none could support jet transports or medium transports. At the height of the Indochina war, the French prepared the Seno runway near Savannakhet to handle light transports and piston-engine fighters by resurfacing it with 5,250 feet of pierced steel planking (PSP). A short 4,000-foot asphalt runway was later constructed at Pakse and a 3,950-foot PSP strip at Xieng Khouangville near the Plain of Jars. United States aid money purchased 3,900 feet of PSP for Vientiane in 1956. The Luang Prabang landing strip remained dirt, however, usable only in dry weather. Of all the airfields, Seno alone had runway lights, a control tower, and radio beacons.[18]

(U) Years of French neglect in education took their toll on the recruiting and training of indigenous air personnel. Few Laotians were literate; fewer still could speak French, much less English. With such a bottleneck to overcome, it was no wonder that the Pacific Air Force (PAF) recommended in March 1956 that no attempt be made to develop the LAAF beyond the air transport and liaison missions. The planners envisioned one composite squadron of C–47s, LT–6s, and T–6s. CINCPAC suggested upgrading this force to a C–47 transport squadron, an LT–6 armed reconnaissance squadron, and a composite L–19/H–19 squadron. The Joint Chiefs of Staff chose PAF's plan, authorizing a composite air arm of thirty C–47s and L–19s but no T–6s. The composite squadron arrangement lasted in the Royal Laotian Air Force (RLAF) for several years.[19]

(U) By the time of the 1958 elections, the composite squadron consisted of six C–47s and six L–19s, with only one of the five C–47 crews being combat ready. This dearth of progress was due to several factors: the poor educational background of most Laotians; the absence of adequate classroom facilities, suitable training aids, or aircraft; and the French replacements with the mission spoke no Laotian dialect, while the students spoke no French. Laotian mechanics, which had been recruited since 1955, had received some on-the-job training, yet were described as having an effectiveness close to nil with "skills deteriorating due to lack of tools and equipment." Given such circumstances, it is understandable why the French major commanding the Laotian air arm reported a loss of morale and discipline. In January 1958, a Laotian Army officer with a reputation as a disciplinarian, Col. Sourith Don Sasorith, assumed command as an additional duty to that of inspector of airborne troops. By midyear, many of the ground personnel taking training in France returned, and morale began to improve. Nevertheless, out of 527 men assigned (721 authorized) there was only a single fully qualified Laotian pilot, with 36 still in training.[20] The embassy, consequently, turned to the U.S. Air Force to make its Booster Shot deliveries.

(U) The 483d Troop Carrier Wing from Ashiya Air Base, Japan, was assigned the Booster Shot airlift mission. It was originally conceived to last five days, airdropping twenty-three tons and airlifting thirty-seven tons from Bangkok, Thailand, to northern Laos. Three C–119 Flying Boxcars would handle the bulk of the cargo, although two of the wing's recently acquired C–130 Hercules transports were given the specific task of dropping a ten-ton bulldozer at Phong Saly and another at Samneua. To monitor the airlift, the PEO relied on the one-man air section of its

17. (U) AMFPA, Area III MAP Logistics Conference, Nov 14–19, 1956, p 324.
18. (U) *Ibid*, pp 322–23; Annex B to PACAF Intel Sum to AIE, Situation in Non-Communist States in the Far East, Jul 58, App F, p 9; PACAF Curr Intel Sum, Oct 23, 1959, Sup.
19. (U) Hist, PACAF, Jan–Jul 56, III, 527; AMFPA, Area III MAP Logistics Conference, Nov 14–19, 1956, pp 322, 338.
20. (U) *Journal of Mutual Security* XI (Mar 58), 112; *Journal of Mutual Security* XI (Nov 57), 118; PACAF Curr Intel Sum, Oct 23, 1959, Sup; rprt, AIRA Saigon, Air Order of Battle of the Laotian Air Force, Nov 1, 1955.

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logistics branch. Besides arranging Booster Shot shipments, this air transportation officer supervised the receipt, storage, and movement of all PEO and Military Assistance Program (MAP) supplies brought in by air.[21]

At first, the operation went smoothly. The crews arrived in Bangkok by March 31 and finished their assignment in four days. Then, just as the aircraft were ready to return to Japan, Ambassador Parsons received Washington's permission to levy further requirements on the task force.[22]

The second phase of Booster Shot was less efficient, due chiefly to the many Laotian and American individuals and organizations involved in the operation. There was no airlift center to assign priorities or to act as a clearing house for requests, and the requests either flooded the embassy or merely trickled in. Moreover, mission planning data was often given to aircrews piecemeal and was seldom adequate. Drop zones were chosen by different agencies, none that knew the precise locations. Names of the selected drop points were handed out each afternoon at the scheduling meeting, and the crews then had to begin the time-consuming task of locating them on out-of-date maps.

The most fertile source of information for the Booster Shot crews proved to be the pilots flying for Civil Air Transport Corporation (CAT). Founded in China in 1946, this airline was an offshoot of Gen. Claire L. Chennault's Flying Tigers. It flew missions of every type for Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and went with him when he fled to Taiwan in 1949. A year later, CAT was reorganized under a CIA proprietary company called the Pacific Corporation. Most of the airline's ground personnel were Chinese nationalists, but nearly all its pilots were Americans, invariably ex-military. The transport crews spent many evenings with these experienced bush pilots (and with Laotian Army officers) poring over the charts to pinpoint drop zones.[23]

The last-minute decision to extend the airlift beyond its initial span caused other complications. Personnel, aircraft, spare parts, and rigging gear were all tailored to an operation of less than a week. Assigned aircraft posed the thorniest problem. Two had just enough flying time left to complete the original five-day mission before returning to Japan for periodic inspection. To save the few remaining hours, the entire operation was relocated to Wattay Airfield in Vientiane on April 4. This transfer of USAF personnel into Laos violated the Geneva accords, so the men swiftly donned civilian clothes and substituted the term "Mister" for all military titles—an act that was to be repeated many times during the next decade by USAF personnel assigned to Laos.

The increased American presence in Vientiane lasted just a day as the usable flying time on two of the C–119s ran out. The aircraft departed immediately, leaving a single Flying Boxcar to support the operation. When the flying time of this C–119 was exhausted on April 15, it also returned to Japan. Meantime, Washington approved another extension of the airlift, and on April 19 three more C–119s arrived at Vientiane and Booster Shot resumed. Three transports from a SEATO exercise and two Military Air Transport Service (MATS) C–124 Globemasters operating from Bangkok were also furnished Ambassador Parsons. The operation ended on April 27, and the entire task force returned to its home stations.

From a military point of view, Booster Shot was a success: the aircraft lifted 1,135 tons of supplies and equipment and airdropped 300 tons into over fifty locations in the Laotian

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21. 483d TCW OpOrd 8–58, Mar 27, 1958, in Annex to hist, 483d TCW, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1958; study, Missions and Functions of PEO.

22. Tab 2, Operation Booster Shot, in Annex to hist, 483d TCW, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1958. Unless otherwise noted, Operation Booster Shot is based on this source.

23. Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* (New York, 1974), p 137; memo, John J. Czyzak, State Department, to Roger Hilsman, State Department, subj: ICC Investigation of Air America, Apr 8, 1963.

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hinterlands. Among the heavy equipment drops were five bulldozers, several soil-brick machines, an earth roller, nine jeeps, and two prefabricated hospitals. The operation—the first USAF support of civic action in Laos-was deemed to have had a greater impact on the country "than any other aid program which the United States had undertaken to date." Its cost ($43 million) was less than one-tenth of the entire 1958 American aid program.

(U) The solid success of the airlift was somewhat remarkable, considering that many of the C–119 crewmembers had little recent airdrop experience. Pacific Air Forces (PACAF)[24] had stressed long, overwater flights for its troop carrier force in preparation for airlandings rather than airdrops. Fortunately, many 483d Wing members assigned to Booster Shot could draw on a previous airdrop background. For newer crewmembers, on-the-job training was necessary. Since the crews flew two missions a day with steady regularity, skill and drop accuracy improved with each flight. In truth, drop accuracy needed to be high because the selected sites were very hard to hit. Elevations of the drop zones varied from the valley floors to the mountain tops. The zone at Phong Saly was located on a high plateau, with the far end abruptly ending in a four thousand-foot plunge to the valley below. The drop points were not marked with white "T's" or panels nor were smoke flares used to help crews estimate surface wind direction and velocity. Often the receiver would select a schoolyard or some other area surrounded by homes to be the drop point. For the most part, these were extremely difficult to pinpoint, and the groups of curious townspeople and children gathered in the center of the drop zone did not help matters.

(U) There were other hazards and limitations, chiefly weather and terrain. In the mountainous areas of northern Laos, the cumulus buildup began early in the day and caused severe turbulence. Clouds of all types prevented accurate map reading, the sole means of navigation in 1958 beyond the forty-mile homing distance from Vientiane. Even though Booster Shot was carried out during the last few weeks of the dry season, thunderstorms were frequently encountered, occasionally with hail.

(U) The most common restriction to visibility was haze, which stemmed from the slash and burn agricultural methods of the mountain tribes and often persisted over wide areas. At times, Booster Shot crews spotted whole mountainsides engulfed in flames. Even in the morning hours before the clouds formed, the haze might rise as high as ten thousand feet, impeding the view at all altitudes up to that level. This condition complicated the problems of navigating in the underdeveloped rural areas and spotting the small drop zones in the mountains.

(U) Terrain in northern Laos is especially rugged and mountainous, with the limestone peaks soaring to nine thousand feet and the overall average approaching seven thousand feet. Except for the few widely scattered dirt strips, there were no areas in the rugged mountains where an emergency landing could be assured. The C–119 crews usually arrived over the drop zone at altitude, then spiraled down to drop level, always keeping within the valley area. They quickly learned that the winds at release altitude and on the surface varied significantly due to the currents being deflected in different directions through the mountains and interconnecting valleys. In many instances, drifting parachutes indicated radical wind shifts even on drops made just minutes apart.

(U) Booster Shot also pointed up how vital air transport would be to future military and civil operations in Laos. Recognizing this, General Brown proposed that PEO's air section be removed from the logistics branch and that a six-man USAF branch be created under an air section chief. Although this officer would have the equivalent of Air Force Specialty Code 6416 (Supply Staff Officer), he would keep all maintenance records and assist in specific airlift projects and would also give technical assistance and counsel to the Laotian air arm, coordinating his efforts with the French Military Mission. This recommendation was approved on October 16, 1958.[25]

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24. (U) The Pacific Air Force (PAF) was redesignated Pacific Air Force/Far East Air Forces (rear) on July 1, 1956, which was, in turn, redesignated Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) on July 1, 1957.

25. (U) Ltr, CHPEO to ASD/ISA, thru CINCPAC, subj: Change in Operations, PEO, Aug 28, 1958; study, Missions

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Early American Involvement

(U) Although Booster Shot had given USAF aircrews valuable experience, it was too late to influence the election.[26] Ambassador Parsons' earlier fears seemed justified when out of the 20 new seats added to the assembly, the NLHX and its allies won 13. Souphanouvong received over thirty-seven thousand votes, the highest for any candidate. While the anticommunists in the legislature still held an overwhelming majority (46 of 59 seats), they became alarmed at the NLHX's sudden show of strength. Several conservative groups now merged with Souvanna's and formed the Laotian People's Rally (RPL). The goal of the new party, led by Souvanna, was to "unite the nationalist forces for the resolute fight against Communism and subversion."[27]

(U) Such slogans were a bit too late in the view of many Americans, who had long believed Souvanna "too soft" on the NLHX. Washington was not at all enthusiastic over his assuming the premiership nor over an expensive aid program for a country seen flirting with the communists. Then, too, a congressional inquiry into the administration of U.S. aid was uncovering the same mismanagement and corruption in customs, banking, and foreign trade that Souphanouvong had built his campaign around. On July 1, 1958, U.S. aid was suspended pending monetary reform, causing speculation that the suspension was designed to force Souvanna from office.[28]

(U) During previous governmental crises, the Royal Laotian Army (now known as the *Armée National Laos*) had remained aloof even though its Chief of Staff, Maj. Gen. Ouane Rathikone, boasted that he could resolve any political problems with military force. Rather than play the role of the man on horseback, Ouane joined forces with a group of young assemblymen, civil servants, and army officers calling themselves the Committee for the Defense of National Interests (or CDIN, after its French title, *Comite pour la Defense des interets Nationaux*). Educated abroad, many of these young men were appalled at the same corruption at which Prince Souphanouvong and the U.S. Congress had pointed the finger. Their motives were not all that puerile, however, for these Young Turks also saw that as long as certain families continued to divide titles and power among themselves, there would be little left for them. It was common knowledge that the CDIN had American backing.[29] On July 23, a coalition of the young reformers and other assemblymen denied Souvanna a vote of confidence on the issue of monetary reform. He had no choice but to resign as prime minister.[30]

(U) Phoui Sananikone formed a new government on August 18, 1958, in which CDIN members received the portfolios of foreign affairs, finance and economic affairs, justice, and that of information, youth, and sports. Not one Pathet Lao was included (there were two under Souvanna), and Souvanna was shipped off to Paris as Ambassador to France.[31]

(U) At first, Phoui's government made some strides in the financial reform required as a condition for resumption of U.S. assistance. The currency was devalued and the graft laden system of export licenses abolished. U.S. aid began flowing again in October. Ideologically,

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and Functions of PEO.

26. (U) It may even have backfired. The Pathet Lao told the peasants that the only reason they were getting this sudden influx of aid was because the government wanted their votes, and once the election was over, no further help would be forthcoming. Considering the poor treatment given the rural population by the government over the years, the argument was hard to refute. [Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 86.]

27. (U) Dommen, pp 108–110; *Journal of Mutual Security* XI (May 58), 103; House Report 546, *United States Air Operations in Laos*, p 46; Sisouk, p 62.

28. (U) Toye, pp 118–19; Sisouk, p 62.

29. (U) Ambassador Parsons later admitted that the U.S. government originally supported the CDIN "as a counterweight of young men who could be differentiated from the older, more cynical and grasping politicians who dominated the scene and often wasted our aid." [Memo of conversation between J. Graham Parsons, Asst SECSTATE for FE Affairs and Sir Frederick R. Hoyer-Miller, Perm Under-Secy of (British) Foreign Ofc, subj: Laos and SEATO Contingency Planning, Jan 5, 1960.]

30. (U) Sisouk, pp 63–65; Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, pp 92–94; Toye, pp 118–19.

31. (U) Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 94; Ackland, "No Place for Neutralism," pp 149–150.

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Phoui favored keeping Laos neutral; but bowing to CDIN pressure, he broke with Souvanna's policy of avoiding relations with either of the governments of divided Vietnam and China. He established consular relations with Saigon and Taipei but not with Hanoi or Peking. Being suspicious of Pathet Lao ties with North Vietnam, he implied he would have no compunction about using the army to clear out their centers of strength.[32]

(S) How successful Phoui would have been had he taken military action against the Pathet Lao is debatable. Despite the U.S. government's setting up the Programs Evaluation Office and supporting the entire Laotian military budget ($44.6 million for fiscal years 1956–59), military progress was at a virtual standstill. The demands of the Algerian war had siphoned off most of the French training/defense force; and by mid-1959, it had fallen from five thousand to five hundred men. Moreover, the French showed slight inclination to work with the PEO or the Laotians, whom they still regarded as inferior soldiers.[33]

(S) U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor had long recognized the deficiencies of the Laotian armed forces and was convinced that the American military air program was too slow and cumbersome to be effective. The authorized strength of the PEO had been increased to sixty in 1957, but procurement of qualified retired personnel was difficult and turnover excessive. Peak strength did not surpass thirty until 1959. In November 1958, he persuaded the Joint Chiefs to send Brig. Gen. John A. Heintges, USA, to Laos to survey the situation. After a month in the country, Heintges proposed reorganizing the PEO by staffing it with active duty military personnel and using them for field training of the Laotian armed forces. This training was to be a joint Franco-American venture with special teams working with each of the twelve RLA battalions.[34] Particular stress was to be placed on internal security training. Heintges also recommended sending a logistics team to inventory equipment and speed delivery of needed items. The plan was later approved by the new CINCPAC, Adm. Harry D. Felt, USN, who urged that an active duty general officer be designated chief of the Programs Evaluation Office. Heintges was subsequently appointed. The plan was also approved by the new U.S. Ambassador to Laos (Horace H. Smith), by Laotian civil and military officials, and by the French embassy and French Military Mission.[35]

(S) Events in Laos now moved quite rapidly and became inextricably intertwined with those occurring in North and South Vietnam. In December 1958, the North Vietnamese made a final attempt to discuss unification with South Vietnam's government. When their overtures were greeted with cold silence, Ho Chi Minh and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap decided to take matters into their own hands. North Vietnamese cadres in the south were alerted that an all-out guerrilla war against the Ngo Dinh Diem regime was imminent. Although caches of arms and ammunition had been left in the south when the Viet Minh withdrew, they would need replenishing once open conflict resumed. Then, too, the North Vietnamese had to continue infiltrating trained cadres as well as receiving couriers and recruits back from the south. The key to their plan was a World War II footpath/trail network that began in North Vietnam but quickly branched out into the mountainous Samneua and Thakhek Provinces of Laos. It then meandered southward through the panhandle of Laos into Cambodia and South Vietnam. This rudimentary trail system was later improved and enlarged, becoming famous as the Ho Chi Minh Trail; but in 1959, it was still

32. (S) Dommen, pp 111, 114.

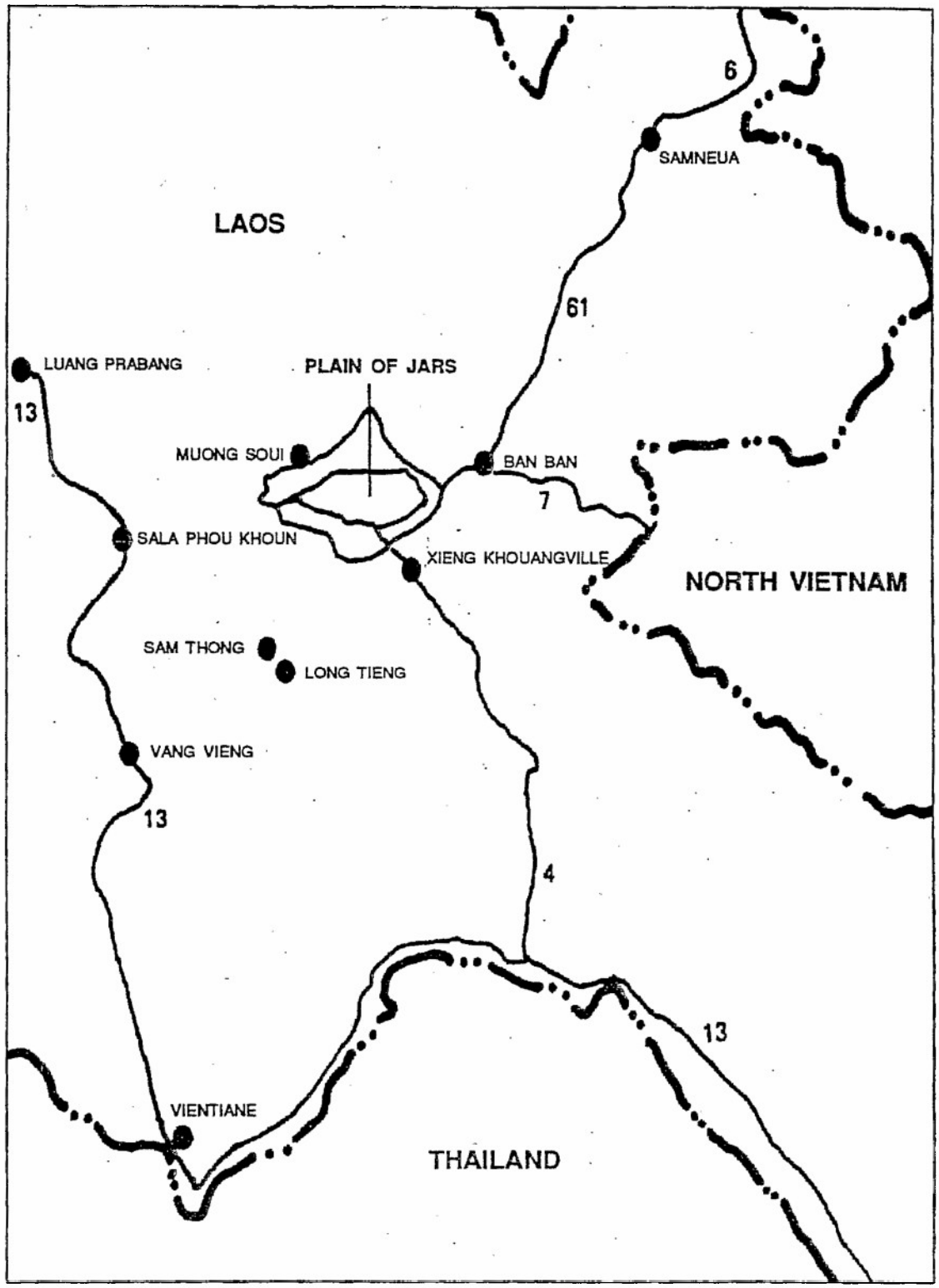
33. (S) *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, pp 18–19; *Journal of Mutual Security* XII (Mar 59), 132–33; MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, Aug 61.

34. (S) The authorized strength of a Laotian army battalion was 789 officers and men, which made up a headquarters company and four rifle companies. The parachute battalion was authorized 850 personnel, organized along the same lines as a standard infantry battalion. [Annex B to PACAF Intel Sum to AIE, Situation in Non-Communist States Far East, Jul 1958, App F, 12.]

35. (S) See note 33.

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Plain of Jars Area



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somewhat elementary. Nevertheless, when Phoui Sananikone announced he was willing to use the Royal Army to clean out the Pathet Lao, there was a distinct possibility that Laotian troops would be patrolling right up to the borders of North Vietnam and interfering with the North Vietnamese and use of the trail.[36]

On January 13, 1959, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the Heintges plan. However, the Laotians and French were still concerned about potential Pathet Lao/Viet Minh reaction to a sudden scattering of large groups of U.S. instructors throughout the countryside, an act tantamount to openly abrogating the Geneva accords. Consequently, the two-phase Franco-American effort was to be conducted at a training center in each of the four military regions, rather than unit training on the line. In the first phase, American and French teams would qualify cadres from the infantry, paratroop, and volunteer battalions. During the second phase, this indigenous cadre, still supervised and assisted by Franco-American teams, would direct local training at battalion and company levels. Instruction of the first Laotian troops was set for September 1. However, as early as July, twelve U.S. Army Special Forces "A" detachments and one "C" (control) detachment, known collectively as Lao Training Advisory Groups, were covertly in Laos for six months temporary duty as "civilian specialists." The use of these Green Berets seemed appropriate since they were organized along team lines and had the highly specialized skills needed in working with native troops in remote and underdeveloped areas and because the situation in Laos paralleled in several respects the training conditions that might be expected in unconventional or guerrilla warfare operations. The language problem that had plagued earlier French training efforts was overcome by using Thai-English interpreters at the field training team (FTT) level.[37]

The Air Force, meantime, had been trying to secure two C–47s and three L–20s requested earlier by Ambassador Smith (October 1958). The Joint Chiefs had approved the deployment but, in January, decided no USAF C–47s were available. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ASD/ISA) requested funds to purchase the transports from commercial sources. Footdragging followed, however, and the money was not allocated until May 29. When the Air Force coordinated a procurement directive with the Bureau of the Budget, its director said he believed the aircraft should come from USAF resources. By then, it was early August; and in faraway Laos, a new and serious crisis was brewing between the government and the Pathet Lao, making it imperative that the C–47s and L–20s be sent as soon as possible.[38]

The Laotian government had earlier decided to settle once and for all the question of integrating the two Pathet Lao battalions. The communists had been demanding since mid-May a higher proportion of officer positions within the merged army. Vientiane finally issued an ultimatum: accept integration within twenty-four hours on the government's terms or surrender and resign. The Pathet Lao 1st Battalion, located north of Luang Prabang, agreed to the conditions; the 2d Battalion, bivouacked under the supposedly watchful eye of the Royal Army on the Plain of Jars, refused. On the cold and foggy night of May 18/19, the entire seven-hundred-man group complete with families, chickens, pigs, and household possessions, stole out of camp and began trekking to an isolated valley forty-five miles away near the North Vietnamese border. General Ouane immediately ordered paratroopers dropped to block the escape, but the wily Pathet Lao commander slipped his troops past them. Phoui then branded the soldiers as rebels and deserters. In Vientiane, Prince Souphanouvong was placed under house arrest.[39]

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36. Dommen, p 114.
37. *Ibid*, pp 19–20; MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, Aug 61.
38. *Journal of Mutual Security* XII (Jul 59), 108; George F. Lemmer, *The Laos Crisis of 1959* (Washington, 1961), pp 28–30.
39. Dommen, pp 117–18; Toye, p 125.

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Early American Involvement

By mid-July—the height of the rainy season—the escaped battalion was bolstered by several hundred former Pathet Lao veterans as well as new recruits. Small detachments of guerrillas soon began probing isolated government outposts in Samneua and Phong Saly Provinces. These attacks, each preceded by a short mortar barrage, a volley of rifle fire, or the blowing of bugles, were sufficient to convince the defenders they were under attack by superior forces. Many outposts were quickly abandoned, the troops fleeing into the jungle or to the next garrison. Despite heavy rains that washed out many roads, hordes of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops were seen marching straight to Vientiane. More than anything else, these pinprick engagements and the resultant panic opened the door for the State Department to publicly announce on July 23 that it was sending Phoui additional technicians for an emergency training program to expand the Royal Army from twenty-five thousand to twenty-nine thousand men. This was, of course, the revised Franco-American Heintges plan using the U.S. Special Forces, a plan worked out months before. The Americans began arriving the next day and were soon followed by considerable equipment, including tanks and trucks, to replace wornout Royal Arm stocks.[40]

Even so, the situation seemed threatening, especially at Samneua where the population and the Royal Army garrison were reportedly surrounded by Pathet Lao guerrillas. The government did not want to relinquish its hard-won presence in the northeastern provinces, so it decided to hold this town and Phong Saly at all costs. The monsoon weather, however, prevented the use of the roads for resupply. The infant Laotian air arm had to commit its small force of six C–47s and three L–20s. Since only nine Laotian military pilots were qualified to fly the C–47, pilots undergoing training were pressed into service as copilots. A troop/cargo shuttle between the Plain of Jars and the rainsoaked airstrip at Samneua[41] was soon under way, augmented by transports chartered from Air Laos or CAT. The airlift was hazardous considering the proficiency of the Laotian pilots (none was instrument qualified), the absence of suitable navigation aids, poor air/ground communications, rugged mountains, and heavy cloud cover. Substantial drops of paratroops, food, and materiel were made; and the LAAF C–47s averaged fifty hours per month, compared to twenty-seven hours a month the previous year. The airlift did strain Laotian resources, necessitating the U.S. Air Force to take the long-promised C–47s from PACAF's inventory. In addition, five (increased from three) L–20s were obtained from the U.S. Army. All aircraft were delivered to Laos during the period September 8–10—nearly a year after Ambassador Smith's request.[42]

Pathet Lao activity in the northeast also precipitated a second look by the Joint Chiefs at CINCPAC Operation Plan 32(L)–59. This contingency plan was designed primarily to hold the main towns and other vital centers of Laos, thus freeing the Royal Army for stepped-up operations against the enemy. Although OPlan 32(L)–59 called for SEATO or other allied nations to participate in any such undertaking, it was written on the presumption the United States would go it alone in an emergency. Using a combination of air and sealift, CINCPAC intended spearheading the deployment of Joint Task Force 116 (JTF 116) with three battalions of the Okinawa-based 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade. Strike support would be furnished by attack carriers of the Seventh Fleet stationed in the South China Sea. After the initial objectives were secured, two Army battle groups would be airlifted from Hawaii to replace the Marines.[43]

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40. Dommen, pp 121–22; *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p C–9.

41. The airstrip at Samneua measured 3,445 by 120 feet. It was reported to be surrounded on all sides by jungle and rugged mountains. The Plain of Jars field was only 1,900 by 66 feet but was an all-weather PSP and asphalt strip. Phong Saly had no airstrip. [DAF *Journal of Mutual Security* XII (Sep 1959), 147.]

42. PACAF Curr Intel Sum, Oct 23, 1959, Sup; Dommen, p 121; Lemmer, p 30; *Journal of Mutual Security* XII (Dec 59), 105–06.

43. Lemmer, p 42; Ray L. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, [The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia] (Washington,

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The War in Northern Laos

Neither the Army nor the Air Force was satisfied with Admiral Felt's plan. The Air Force's chief objection was that, aside from a firm commitment for airlift, its role was limited to merely alerting one fighter squadron for possible movement to Thailand. The Air Staff wanted a tactical fighter squadron and a tactical reconnaissance force included in JTF 116 and scheduled to arrive in Thailand at the same time as the first ground units. Then, too, the size of the initial and follow-on ground forces was thought to be excessive.[44]

The Army believed Marines should be used only if speed was essential. They called for the inclusion of parachute assault operations in case the airlandings were opposed; and since the main operations after the first phase would center on the Army, one of their generals should command from the start.

Army and Air Force objections to the Marine/Navy flavor of OPlan 32(L)–59 persuaded the Joint Chiefs and CINCPAC to modify the plan around the end of August. In the new version, an Army general would command JTF 116, the main combat elements would be Army battle groups, and Air Force units would deploy to Thailand simultaneously with ground force movements into Laos. Admiral Felt insisted, however, that the original plan employing the Marines be kept for emergency use.

The situation in Laos in the summer of 1959 further convinced Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Thomas D. White that a full-time MAAG should be created in Vientiane, including a complete takeover of training from the French. White recognized such unilateral action could have serious international repercussions, but he believed it was necessary to save Laos from the communists. His proposal was being evaluated by key government officials[45] on September 4, when word reached them that Phoui had appealed to the United Nations for help, insisting that North Vietnamese soldiers were fighting in Laos. Under Secretary of State Robert D. Murphy warned that there was no proof of this and that if the U.S. overtly entered Laos, it was highly probable that North Vietnam and/or communist China would too.[46]

Discussions resulted in a Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum to Secretary of Defense Wilson backing White's full time MAAG proposal and CINCPAC's alerting JTF 116. The chiefs also recommended that the State Department take steps to obtain SEATO military assistance. The next day, President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved the recommended military operations involving JTF 116 and directed that, if launched, it should move "with great swiftness."

In Honolulu, Admiral Felt had long viewed the situation in Laos with alarm. In early June, before the JCS review of OPlan 32(L)–59, he made Marine Maj. Gen. Carson A. Roberts head of JTF 116. He also notified PACAF that the first task under the plan was to airlift the Marines and their equipment from Okinawa to the Vientiane and Seno airfields. Logistic air support for the Marines and the U.S. Army troops that would follow was to last thirty days, or until overland supply could begin from Bangkok. Detailed planning by the 315th Air Division figured twenty-four (later fifty) C–130s could do the job. There was concern that the airfields in Laos and Thailand, as well as the terminal facilities in the western Pacific, would in time become saturated, causing severe control and handling problems. In any case, it would likely demand more aircraft. If so, PACAF intended asking the Tactical Air Command for two more C–130 squadrons. In early September, with the Laotian crisis coming to a head, PACAF was told that C–124 Globemasters might replace TAC's C–130s. Airlift

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1983), p 38.

44. Lemmer, pp 42–43; Bowers, p 38.

45. Included were the other JCS members and representatives from Defense and State as well as from the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States Information Agency. [George F. Lemmer, *The Laos Crisis of 1959* (Washington, 1961), 50.]

46. Lemmer, pp 40–59.

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personnel, however, doubted that the local airstrips could hold up under those larger and heavier transports.[47]

[redacted] Back in Washington, General White questioned whether any of the current military proposals would solve the Laotian dilemma. On September 8, the day the fact-finding committee for Laos was approved by the United Nations Security Council, he asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the green light to send a squadron of Strategic Air Command (SAC) B–47 jet bombers to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. White wanted to cripple the insurgents and their supply lines by attacking selected targets in North Vietnam, either with conventional or nuclear weapons.[48] Although White's paper called for giving the North Vietnamese a preattack warning, the other chiefs tabled it, possibly due to the inclusion of nuclear weapons. Seven months later, the proposal was withdrawn. Still, the Air Force considered it a valid reflection of the long-standing USAF belief that Asian communists would be less likely to cause trouble if they knew U.S. counteraction would not be confined to Laos or conventional weapons.[49]

[redacted] On September 15, the UN team reached Vientiane. Its presence in the country prompted an instant winding down of the fighting, followed by a general relaxation of tensions on both sides. By October 6, the situation so had stabilized that Felt authorized the unloading of JTF 116's supply ships and PACAF canceled its air transport alert. A week later JTF 116 began demobilizing, its members returning to their parent units. After a month of examining evidence and making on-the-spot visits to Samneua and Phong Saly Provinces, the UN committee reported to the Security Council. Since the North Vietnamese had refused to cooperate with the committee members, the report was missing pertinent facts. Nevertheless, it noted that Hanoi had sent ample arms, ammunition, and supplies, as well as political cadres to the Pathet Lao. On the weighty question of whether the North Vietnamese had done any of the fighting, the team said there was no hard evidence to support Phoui's accusations.[50]

[redacted] The 1959 Laos crisis stressed that the anti-Pathet Lao, hard-line policies adopted by Phoui and abetted by the United States had scant chance of success. Souvanna Phouma's methods may have been slow and perhaps painful to American interests, but they reconciled the NLHX with the government and brought peace to the countryside. In contrast, Phoui and his CDIN cohorts had severely strained the accords, split the Government of National Union, and hastened a renewal of the insurgency.

[redacted] The crisis pointed out that, despite several years of support, America's long-range goals for the area were still hazy or ill defined—even unrealistic. In place of its historical position as a buffer state between contending centers of power, the mountain kingdom was to be a bulwark against communism. This was an enterprise for which the Laotian were not at all well suited, either by geographic location, history, or temperament. The instrument of this new policy was to be the Royal Army; but the stringent curbs on its development, first by the French and later by the Geneva accords, left the army neither trained nor equipped for the task of nation building. Furthermore, in any insurgency, the need to "win the hearts and minds" of the people is paramount; yet, funds for civic action and economic/technical assistance were relatively small.

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47. [redacted] Lemmer, pp 40–59.

48. [redacted] White's proposal may have had its roots in "Atomic Weapons in Limited Wars in Southeast Asia," (see Frederic H. Smith, "Nuclear Weapons and Limited War," *Air University Quarterly Review*, XII (Spring 1960), 3-27). This Fifth Air Force study focused on the use of atomic weapons for "situation control" in jungles, valley supply routes, karst areas, and mountain defiles to block enemy movement and to clear away cover. Air Force Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis E. LeMay later reviewed the study in December, praising it as a "valuable addition to the present concept of limited war." (Hist, Fifth AF, Jul-Dec 58, Vol I, pp 146–51.

49. [redacted] Memo, CS USAF to JCS, subj: Preparation for Decisive Termination of Hostilities in Laos, Sep 8, 1959; Lemmer, p 55; Dommen, pp 123–24.

50. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 10, subj: The 1960 General Elections in Laos, Jul 13, 1960; Toye, p 135.

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The War in Northern Laos

Four times as many American dollars were funneled into the Laotian armed forces as into social and economic projects designed to immediately assist the people at the village and tribal level. (If such projects had been started earlier, the ties between the rural population and their government would have been strengthened and Pathet Lao propaganda and recruiting would have had less chance of succeeding. A reexamination of priorities and a better balance between civilian and military requirements were needed.)

(S) From a military standpoint, no one was sure what role SEATO would play or what action the United States should take if the kingdom collapsed. CINCPAC OPlan 32(L)–59 called for the Marines and the U.S. Army to hold the major towns along the Mekong while the Royal Army sought battle with the elusive, guerrilla enemy. Considering the capabilities of the Laotian army and their panicky overreaction to the pinprick attacks of the previous summer, their success in the field against the insurgents was doubtful.

(S) The divergent views within the JCS and CINCPAC over roles and missions reflected traditional interservice rivalries. To the U.S. Army, using Marines to hold land areas after they were assaulted and captured encroached on its mission. Failure to bring reconnaissance and fighter forces into the plan meant that the Navy and not the Air Force would have the chief air combat role. Limited to airlift, the Air Force saw itself as nothing more than a logistic feeder service for ground forces. While most of these complaints against CINCPAC's plan were later rectified, they illustrated that each service was jealously guarding its roles and seeking to expand them whenever possible.

(S) The Air Force's argument over the need to include reconnaissance and strike aircraft in CINCPAC's plan was justified. However, in light of TAC's emphasis in the 1950s on nuclear weapons delivery, its ability to effectively hit targets with conventional high-explosive bombs was questionable. So, too, was the proposal to employ nuclear weapons to destroy insurgents and their supply sources. It is doubtful whether any suitable targets for such weapons existed in the jungles of northern Laos or North Vietnam. More important, such an attack would have given the communists a tremendous propaganda victory and possibly spread the war to China and the western Pacific.

(S) Even if U.S. goals in Laos had been clearly defined, the absence of reliable intelligence on enemy intentions and movements posed serious problems for future military operations. American reaction to the communists during the summer crisis rested on information furnished by General Ouane and his staff. These reports turned out to be inaccurate and overinflated, most of them based on radio messages from isolated government outposts in Pathet Lao strongholds. Due to the monsoon, few ventured into the northeast to find out firsthand the true nature of the conflict or the extent of North Vietnamese involvement. With such unreliable intelligence, it is no wonder government positions were visualized falling like dominoes. Some type of organization to acquire, evaluate, and transmit reliable information to the decisionmakers was sorely needed. That such a structure was never set up in Laos led to numerous misunderstandings between the embassy, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Air Force over the next decade.

(S) The summer crisis of 1959 had no sooner faded than the government was beset by a new set of problems. On December 30, Phoui resigned as prime minister in a dispute with the CDIN over the forthcoming elections. The next night Phoumi Nosavan (now a brigadier general) staged a coup d'etat. However, western opposition to a military dictatorship led to a compromise in which elder statesman Kou Abhay would head a caretaker government with Phoumi as defense minister.

(S) The new government decided to make sure that the Pathet Lao did not repeat their 1958 electoral victory. Election districts were gerrymandered, candidates' qualifications were altered to exclude the communists, and the Laotian Army (now called the FAL—*Forces Armées du Laos*) was sent into the provinces to create a "favorable climate" for conservative candidates. At the same time LAAF C–47s flew over the countryside dropping propaganda leaflets in support

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of government candidates. The U.S. Air Force also made a belated contribution. In March, the PEO requested a C–130 airdrop of two bulldozers and two jeeps at Phong Saly to construct an airstrip. The first airdrop did not occur until April 26, however, two days after the election.

[redacted] Phoumi's efforts succeeded. Only nine Pathet Lao members ran for office and they came away empty-handed. The margin of victory of some progovernment candidates, however, underlined the fraudulent nature of the balloting. In the Pathet Lao stronghold of Samneua Province, the conservative candidate polled 6,503 votes, his opponent 13. In another area, the communist candidate voted for himself and was supported by at least a dozen members of his family; yet in the official tabulation, he received no votes whatever.[51]

[redacted] There was one bright aspect to this rather seamy side of Laotian politics. Souvanna Phouma returned from the ambassadorial post in Paris, was elected delegate from Luang Prabang and subsequently chosen assembly chairman. Partly because of Western pressure against any military junta, the king selected moderate Tiao Somsanith (Souvanna's nephew) as prime minister, and Phoumi continued as minister of defense. In one of his first few acts, Phoumi decided to begin the trial of Souphanouvong; but on the rainy night of May 23/24, the prince escaped, taking his guards along. He then went underground and, after walking nearly three hundred miles and visiting Pathet Lao groups in several provinces, reappeared four months later in Samneua. By then, the northeastern border town was back in Pathet Lao hands.[52]

[redacted] At the time of the elections, the FAL had attained the planned goal of thirty thousand men but had improved little in quality, chiefly because the PEO/FMM training program was far behind schedule. The program had first slipped during the 1959 "summer crisis," and further delays ensued when Phoumi assigned the army to political activities prior to the 1960 elections. By March 1960, just 32 percent of the goals of the first phase had been achieved, and the second phase had not even started.[53]

[redacted] The attitude of many Laotian Army officers discouraged the Americans. Too often, the Laotian officers disdained the training offered, either with their units or in separate officer groups, considering themselves qualified merely by virtue of their commissions. Others who may have felt a need for the training would not attend because they would suffer loss of face, since the centers were manned by lower ranking U.S. and French instructors. Thus, the weapons and small unit tactical instruction given the NCOs and other enlisted men was largely wasted because many of the officers remained untrained and incompetent. Battlefield results would later show how disastrous this had been. Troops led by inept commanders sometimes pulled out of good defensive positions at the mere prospect of attack; or if they did prepare to fight, they found their officers beating a hasty retreat to the rear. When this happened, everyone played follow-the-leader.[54]

[redacted] Adequate logistic support for the program was lacking. Besides facilities, the Royal Army was to furnish items from its MAP stocks, but they seldom appeared. The problem was the army pipeline—once U.S. military aid left PEO hands, it was beyond any control within

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51. [redacted] Toye, pp 135–36; intvw, author with Col John S. Wood, USAF, Ret, Sep 7, 1974. Colonel Wood served in Laos from October 1959 to March 1962 as Programs Evaluation Office advisor to Military Region IV, and later as PEO advisor to the Revolutionary Free Army of Laos (Phoumi). When the Military Assistance Advisory Group surfaced, Wood became MAAG advisor to the Royal Laotian Government minister of defense.

52. [redacted] *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, pp 25–26, A–23; *Journal of Mutual Security* XIII (Jun 60), 137–38; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 310, subj: Transmission Report Franco-American Discussions of Joint Military Training Program, Mar 9, 1960; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 3241, Jun 10, 1960.

53. [redacted] *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, pp 26, 31, 49, C–128; rprt, JUSMAGTHAI, Final Report of Military Assistance and Advisory Group, Laos, Nov 6, 1962 [hereafter cited as MAAG Laos Final Rprt]; intvw, author with Col Ernest P. Uiberall, USA, Ret, Mar 13, 1974. A career Army intelligence officer, Uiberall served with the Programs Evaluation Office/ Military Assistance Advisory Group from January to July 1961.

54. [redacted] *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p A–19.

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Laos. The Americans could not properly inventory, inspect, or check the use of this equipment; and as a consequence, little pressure or leverage could be brought to bear on Laotian officers to participate in the training program. Finally, the divided training responsibility caused friction between the Americans and the French.[55]

In February 1960, Phoumi requested that the training be extended for a year since it was so far behind schedule. Washington was willing to continue until June 30, 1961, when it believed the FAL would be reasonably well trained and in a position to start its own program. The French, however, wanted to resume exclusive instruction of the Laotian Army, preferably by September 1960, but no later than the end of the year. They were reported to have 120 instructors ready to ship to Laos as PEO replacements. Phoumi vetoed this proposal, his rejection reflecting his growing anti-French feeling. He would not discuss any changes that excluded U.S. participation. In fact, Phoumi wanted the French removed from the country and the entire training operation turned over to the U.S. Special Forces.[56]

Not everyone sided with Phoumi. Certain officers resented the "meddling" of U.S. instructors in their units and preferred French methods. Laotian officers were most persistent in their refusal to abandon defensive, positional warfare—derived in part from previous French training—as opposed to operations employing maneuver and surprise. These officers were backed by a group of politicians who believed the U.S. presence (the PEO's strength had increased to over five hundred by the end of 1959) violated the Geneva accords, was an unnecessary provocation to their communist neighbors, and should be terminated. Souvanna Phouma supported this position. In early July, rumors circulated in Vientiane that the cabinet was about to ask the king to discontinue the Franco-American effort and that the FAL training program be transferred to Thailand.[57]

The Royal Thailand Government (RTG), headed by Marshal Sarit Thanarat, had long kept a wary eye on the Laos situation. After consulting with U.S. officials, Sarit agreed to furnish instructors and facilities where entire FAL battalions would undergo training. This arrangement offered several advantages. First, since their languages were closely related, the Thai and Laotians did not need interpreters. Second, although the Thai considered the Laotians "poor cousins," the chance of racial conflict between them (an accusation occasionally leveled by both the French and U.S. Special Forces) was minimized. From an American point of view, Sarit's offer meant the program could be conducted openly without the French. A small step in this direction had been taken in 1957 when the PEO arranged for the training of a handful of Laotian logistics personnel. This was followed by a parachute battalion the next year; and in the fall of 1959, U.S. Special Forces, under the code name Erawan, were used to train a few Laotians in unconventional warfare and antiguerrilla tactics.[58]

Sarit's offer of Thai personnel and bases to augment the U.S. effort set a precedent that was to continue for the next decade. However, even as Vientiane, Paris, and Washington were trying to reach a compromise on the PEO/FMM training program, an obscure paratrooper, Capt. Kong Le, suddenly occupied the strategic points in Vientiane and overthrew the government.

Standing five feet, two inches, Kong Le was the son of a Kha tribesman from southern Laos. Enlisting in the paratroopers in 1951, he became an officer within two years and fought with the Viet Minh in the Ou River Valley during the siege of Dien Bien Phu. Under PEO

55. [redacted] *Ibid*, pp C–13, C–14, C–45; MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, Aug 61; Wood intvw, Sep 7, 1974. [redacted]

56. [redacted] *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p A–23; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2715, Apr 26, 1960, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 2135, Jun 3, 1960, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 3226, Jun 8, 1960.

57. [redacted] *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, pp A–24, C–49; Uiberall intvw, Mar 13, 1974; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 266, Aug 12, 1960.

58. [redacted] *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, pp 28, 47.

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sponsorship, Kong Le attended the Philippine army's ranger school in 1957 and took command of the recently formed 2d Paratroop Battalion when he returned to Laos.

During the 1959 summer crisis, this unit gained the reputation of being one of the best FAL units. For this reason, Phoumi chose it to spearhead the Bolovens sweep operations just before the elections. On August 8, 1960, three days after their return to Vientiane from the field, the weary paratroopers were abruptly ordered to mop up a suspected Pathet Lao pocket roughly thirty miles west of the city. Disgusted at the government's failure to afford them adequate messing and housing, and tired of being sent on what they deemed fruitless military operations, Kong Le and eight hundred men decided to act. On the night of August 8/9, while Prime Minister Tiao Somsanith and most of his cabinet were in Luang Prabang to discuss the state funeral of the late king, the paratroopers conducted a coup d'etat. They quickly occupied Wattay Airfield and captured five LAAF C–47s. Key government buildings and the radio station fell next, and by seven the following morning, Kong Le's soldiers completely controlled the capital.[59]

Kong Le—"the soldier's soldier"—skyrocketed overnight from obscurity to a national hero. Broadcasting from Radio Vientiane, he said his purpose was to end the fighting, bring about a truly neutral government, and eliminate all foreign (especially American) intervention in the country's political and military affairs. (The last comment came as a shock to the U.S. advisors—they thought Kong Le was pro-American.) He also forcefully plugged for Souvanna's appointment as prime minister, claiming that Souvanna was the only man who could reconcile the country's different factions. These developments climaxed on August 13 when the National Assembly, practically at gunpoint, expressed "no confidence in Tiao Somsanith's cabinet and it resigned.[60] The prime minister remained in Luang Prabang following the coup. The assembly deputies sitting in Vientiane repeatedly sent him messages stressing the tense situation in the capital and that bloodshed was imminent. To spare the populace, Tiao accepted the "no confidence" censure even though he realized it was done under duress.

Three days later, Souvanna Phouma was approved as prime minister. In his address to the deputies, he pledged to unite the country, seek genuine neutrality, respect all treaties, and accept aid from any country. He proposed a new cabinet in which he kept the defense and foreign affairs portfolios. Quinim Pholsena, a known leftist, would be interior minister, but his influence was balanced by the appointment of Touby Lyfound, a conservative and respected Meo leader, as minister of justice and religious affairs.[61]

Refusing to recognize the new government, Phoumi Nosavan flew to Bangkok and then to Savannakhet where he formed a countercoup revolutionary committee. This divided the Laotian army and created new problems for the Programs Evaluation Office. Since splitting the PEO was the solution, General Heintges stayed in Vientiane with most of the office while a "rump PEO" was set up at Savannakhet under Col. Alfred R. Brownfield, Jr., USA. This created

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59. Dommen, pp 143–45; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 266, Aug 12, 1960; memo, Dept of State (PA to PAI), subj: Visit to Vientiane, Sep 30, 1960, n.d. (ca Oct 60); rprt, AIRA Saigon, Semi-annual FWAIS Capabilities—Laos, Mar 22, 1961. Bernard Fall claimed that, on the day of the coup, Kong Le and his officers went through a special tactical problem with their U.S./French advisors—how to hold and defend a major city. As a touch of realism, Vientiane was chosen for the problem. U.S. personnel later recalled that the Laotians watched with great care and assiduously took notes as they went through the exercise step by step. During the briefing, the Americans pointed out the need to secure the airfield, radio transmitters, central telephone and telegraph facilities, government buildings, and powerplants—all duly noted and subsequently performed by the paratroopers. [Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, pp 186-87.] None of the PEO personnel interviewed by the authors remembered such a briefing. In fact, Colonel Wood, military advisor to Military Region IV at the time of the coup, termed the episode "a figment of Fall's imagination." [Intvw, author with Col John S. Wood, Jr, USA, Ret, Sep 7, 1974.]

60. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 268, Aug 12, 1960; *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p A–25; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 28–29; *New York Times*, Aug 11, 1960.

61. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 303, Aug 16, 1960; Dept of State Circular 248, Aug 18, 1960.

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an anomalous situation in which the United States was supporting both the established government and a rebel group.[62]

American policymakers were likewise divided. Winthrop G. Brown, the new Ambassador to Laos, [redacted] supported Souvanna. The Defense Department and CIA headquarters in Washington backed Phoumi. The State Department vacillated. On the one hand, it regarded Souvanna as soft on communism and unable to control the flamboyant Kong Le. Moreover, only Phoumi could reunite the army. On the other hand, open support for Phoumi might lead to a military dictatorship that was incompatible with U.S. policy. The sole practical solution in State's view was a compromise.[63] With this in mind, Ambassador Brown arranged a series of meetings between Souvanna and Phoumi, but both sides proved intransigent.

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On September 16, a new element was injected. The Pathet Lao ordered forces loyal to Souphanouvong to avoid encounters with the Souvanna/Kong Le troops and, wherever possible, to attack Phoumi's. The Pathet Lao 2d Battalion (having escaped from the Plain of Jars the previous year) at once came out of hiding and struck the Samneua garrison. When the first PEO reports painted a dismal picture of the garrison's plight, Defense and State quickly authorized the release of military supplies from stocks in Thailand direct to FAL units in the field. Due to the FAL's cumbersome logistic pipeline, the urgent situation and the lack of LAAF airlift (Kong Le had captured five of eight C–47s during his coup), Air America (the new name for CAT[64]) was given the resupply mission. To avoid any misunderstanding on Phoumi's part, Ambassador Brown stressed that the airlift was solely to assist in the defense of Samneua. Under no circumstances would the United States government condone the use of its equipment to attack the neutralists.[65]

For the next ten days (September 17 to 27) the Air America airlift of two C–46s and two C–47s performed yeoman's service, transporting rice, ammunition, and some military personnel to areas throughout Laos. Casualties were often evacuated on the return trip. When the Pathet Lao overran the airstrip at Samneua on September 28, Ambassador Brown halted all Air America flights into combat areas. Henceforth, the airline was restricted to hauling troops and cargo to Savannakhet, to outposts securely in Phoumi's hands, and to the Plain of Jars, delivering five tons there on September 29. If supplies had to be dropped in combat zones, Air Laos or the LAAF delivered them. Cut off from all resupply and under strong Pathet Lao pressure, Samneua's garrison of fifteen hundred men evacuated the town and retreated southward. On September 29, a combined Kong Le/Pathet Lao force crossed the Kading River in a move toward Thakhek. Phoumi's soldiers fought stubbornly and eventually forced the attackers back across the river. The fighting ended when the king brought both sides to Luang Prabang, and they agreed the Kading River would be the boundary line between them.[66]

While Ambassador Brown was desperately trying to prevent the Laotian fighting from erupting into open civil war, Washington was tiring of Souvanna's indecision. On October 12, Under Secretary of State J. Graham Parsons (the former Ambassador to Laos) and John N. Irwin II, ASD/ISA, were sent to Vientiane to sway the prime minister into taking a harder line toward Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. The mission succeeded only in further aggravating the matter.[67]

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62. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 288, Aug 15, 1960.
63. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, *et al*, 280, Aug 21, 1960; ltr, J. Graham Parsons, Asst SECSTATE for Far Eastern Affairs, to Winthrop G. Brown, Ambassador to Laos, no subj, Aug 26, 1960.
64. CAT changed its name in September 1959 to Air America. [Peter Dale Scott, "Air America: Flying the U.S. into Laos," in *War and Revolution*, eds: Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, (New York, 1970), 310.]
65. Dommen, pp 153–54; msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 315, Sep 16, 1960, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 579, Sep 21, 1960, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 531, Sep 23, 1960.
66. Dommen, p 154; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 623, Sep 27, 1960, 636, Sep 28, 1960, 640, Sep 29, 1960; MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, Aug 61.
67. Memo of conversation, John N. Irwin II, ASD/ISA, Vice Adm Herbert D. Riley, C/S, CINCPAC, Brig

Late that month, several days after the first Soviet ambassador to Laos presented his credentials, Souvanna agreed to accept Soviet economic aid; and on November 9, he announced a new cabinet that included two Pathet Lao in minor positions.[68] Worse still was Souvanna's choice of the leftist Quinim Pholsena as chief negotiator with the Pathet Lao.[69] This was too much for Washington—even the State Department threw its weight behind Phoumi.[70]

(U) Still, the Americans hoped to avoid open hostilities. Ambassador Brown in particular went all out to curb Phoumi, but Admiral Felt encouraged the Laotian strong man. The upshot was a serious dispute over who was running things in Laos—a dispute that continued to characterize American involvement right up to the end.[71] On November 28, Phoumi took matters into his own hands by crossing the Kading River. In the short fierce battle that ensued, the neutralists were driven back toward Paksane. The civil war between the noncommunist elements in Laos had begun.

Gen Phoumi Nosavan, and Prince Boun Oum, in msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 686, Oct 18, 1960; memo, Dept of State (John M. Steeves, FE, to Merchant thru S/S), subj: Recent Developments in Laos, Oct 24, 1960; Wood intvw, Sep 7, 1974; intvw, author with Brig Gen Albert R. Brownfield, Jr., USA, Ret, Aug 7, 1974. As a lieutenant colonel, Brownfield served in Laos during June 1960–July 1961 as G-3, PEO/MAAG. Two weeks after Kong Le's coup, he was sent to Savannakhet as Phoumi Nosavan's personal military advisor.

68. (U) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane, 895, Nov 9, 1960.

69. (U) Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 498, Nov 9, 1960, 500, Nov 10, 1960, 502, Nov 10, 1960.

70. (U) Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 500, Nov 0, 1960, 502, Nov 10, 1960; memo, Col Edwin F. Black, USA, mil asst to DEPSECDEF, to Thomas S. Gates, Jr., SECDEF, subj: Laos 10:30 AM Meeting with Mr. Herter (Nov 10, 1960), Nov 9, 1960 [note that memo is dated before meeting took place]; msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 511, Nov 12, 1960, 513, Nov 13, 1960.

71. (U) Msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, 282316Z Nov 60, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1014, Nov 29, 1960, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 571 and 572, Dec 1, 1960, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 578, Dec 2, 1960, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1042, Dec 2, 1960. An unclassified version of this last cited message and Ambassador Brown's implied threat of resignation can be found in Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos since 1954* (Boston, 1972), p 117. Stevenson cites an interview with Ambassador Brown as his source.

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Chapter II

The Laotian Civil War and the Emergence of Air Power (U)

(U) As Phoumi inched down the Mekong River from Paksane, he put the finishing touches on his planned airborne assault against Vientiane. At this point, the Russians decided to honor their October agreement with Souvanna and, on December 4, began airlifting food, fuel, and military hardware from Hanoi to Vientiane.[1] While the airlift may have been a late response to Thailand's unofficial blockade of traffic crossing the Mekong River to Vientiane, the real value of the Soviet airlift lay in keeping Kong Le (and the Pathet Lao) supplied with arms and ammunition under the cover of the economic aid agreement. Actually, cross-river traffic on the Mekong had always been difficult to control; and smuggling was brisk, with plenty of gasoline (otherwise rationed) available on the black market at only slightly higher prices. Most Laotians, in fact, preferred the illegal sources rather than putting up with bureaucratic red tape. Some foods, such as milk, flour, and sugar, were scarce; but rice could be found in the stores and, although costly, was expected to come down in price once the new crop was harvested.[2]

(U) The Soviet transports had been flying for just four days when Col. Kouprasith Abhay seized the capital on December 8, forcing Kong Le's troops to withdraw to Wattay Airfield. Although expressing loyalty to Souvanna, Kouprasith claimed he acted because of communist inroads into the government. However, when he insisted on arresting certain Pathet Lao, Souvanna objected and the two men split. Kouprasith's men then withdrew back to the Chinaimo barracks outside Vientiane, and Kong Le reoccupied the city. Kouprasith was an independent-minded man who considered Phoumi incapable of resolving the present crisis; but he, nonetheless, decided to cast his lot with the Savannakhet group. He radioed Phoumi, who responded by dropping about two hundred paratroopers of the 1st Battalion into the area near Chinaimo. Other forces began pushing overland from Paksane, which also had been captured on December 8. The next day, Kouprasith's and Phoumi's troops joined and moved toward the heart of the city. That night, Souvanna, his family, and several of his cabinet fled to Cambodia. The battle for Vientiane had begun.[3]

(U) Quinim Pholsena, the leftist, anti-American member of Souvanna's cabinet stayed behind. On December 10, he slipped out of Vientiane aboard a Hanoi-bound Ilyushin transport. Within twenty-four hours, he had a firm agreement with the Russians and North Vietnamese to airlift arms and supplies to Kong Le in exchange for an alliance between the latter's forces and the Pathet Lao. The next day, as Phoumi's column reached the outskirts of Vientiane, the Russian transports unloaded six 105-mm howitzers and several North Vietnamese gun crews at Wattay. Much of this equipment was of U.S. manufacture captured by the Viet Minh from the French at

1. (U) The airlift had not started earlier because the Ilyushin transports had to be pulled off their Congo assignment and flown to Hanoi. [Dommen, p 164.]
2. (U) Dommen, pp 166–67; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1057, Dec 6, 1960.
3. (U) Msg, CINCUSARPAC to ACS/Intel, DA, 100220Z Dec 60; memo, Hugh S. Cumming, Dir/Intel & Rsch, Dept of State, to SECSTATE, subj: Laos: Implications of December 8 Coup in Vientiane by Colonel Kouprasith, Dec 8, 1960.

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Dien Bien Phu. Col. William Law, U.S. Army attaché, deemed this a "smart move" by the North Vietnamese since there were over nine thousand 105-mm rounds in the Vientiane depot. The United States countered by removing all restrictions on the use of Air America aircraft.[4]

Phoumi assaulted the capital on December 13 and captured Wattay the next day, thus temporarily ending the Russian airlift at seventy flights. Two days of wild shooting followed, causing over five hundred civilian casualties (but few military) and partially destroying the U.S. embassy and PEO compounds. On December 15, the North Vietnamese laid down an extremely accurate rolling artillery barrage that Kong Le failed to move in behind. Instead, he and his newfound allies withdrew northward from the city along Route 13. This retreating column (estimated at seven hundred men) was supported by a constant stream of supplies dropped by the Ilyushin transports. Meantime, forty members of the National Assembly, transported to Savannakhet by Air America, voted no confidence in Souvanna. The king quickly appointed Prince Boun Oum to head a new provisional government, a government recognized at once by Thailand and the United States. The legality of this action was questioned by those who believed it necessary for Souvanna to formally resign before a new prime minister could be appointed—this Souvanna steadfastly refused to do.[5]

As Phoumi retook Vientiane and Boun Oum's government was recognized by the king, Admiral Felt placed the units assigned to JTF 116 under increased readiness. He also thought it imperative that the United States start scouring the country to find out what Kong Le and the communists were up to. The LAAF, however, lacked reconnaissance aircraft; and Thai equipment was not suitable for deep penetrations. Therefore, Felt ordered the air attaché in Saigon, Lt. Col. Butler B. Toland, Jr., to resume low-level reconnaissance flights over northern Laos. Since August, Toland had been furnishing the Laotian government with occasional photography using his VC–47. Toland was accredited to Vientiane as well as to Phnom Penh; and having diplomatic immunity, he was legally entitled to fly over Laos without filing an International Civil Aviation Organization flight plan. His aircraft had K–17 and K–20 cameras mounted in back in the latrine section, and a door covering the cameras was opened whenever photography was needed. The cameras could take pictures at elevations ranging from three thousand to twelve thousand feet.[6]

Toland's earlier pictures were of airfields for upgrading aeronautical charts and publications, but his new photos showed the Soviet airlift to be more extensive than supposed. From the December 20 pictures, for example, interpreters counted eighteen parachutes on the ground and heavy road traffic about twenty-two miles north of Vientiane. On December 21, Toland contributed most to the fledgling reconnaissance effort. After an aborted attempt to land some FAL officers at Muong Sing in northeastern Laos, he observed an Il–14 making low passes over a drop zone near Vang Vieng. He maneuvered his VC–47 to within a hundred feet of the Russian aircraft, noting it bore the markings "KOFNCP" on one wing and serial numbers on the other. Toland banked his plane and began taking pictures with a hand-held camera. He followed the Il–14 in its racetrack drop pattern for about fifteen minutes, then headed south for Thailand—since he had no darkroom facilities whatever in any of his three offices, all film was

4. Dommen, p 167; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1124, 1128, Dec 11, 1960, 1136, Dec 12, 1960, JCS to CINCPAC, 987223, Dec 14, 1960, USARMA Vientiane to SECSTATE, 121145Z Dec 60.

5. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p D–26; Toye, p 159; Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 198; msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1016, Dec 15, 1960, CINCPAC to JCS, 180612Z Dec 60.

6. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956–1961* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), pp 608–9; hist, PACAF, Jul-Dec 61, I, pt 2, 13–18; msgs, CINCPAC to Actg CHPEO Savannakhet, 172359Z Dec 60, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 641, Dec 14, 1960, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1015, Dec 16, 1960, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1033, Dec 17, 1960, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE 1185, Dec 17, 1960; intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Butler B. Toland, Jr., USAF, Ret, Nov 18, 1974. During July 1960–August 1962, Toland served as an air attaché to South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

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processed by the air attaché in Bangkok. Meantime, a message was sent to Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis E. LeMay informing him of what had happened. LeMay knew the State Department was very anxious to document the Soviet airlift,[7] so he immediately ordered a C–130 from Clark Air Base, Philippines, to Bangkok to pick up the film. Approximately seven hours after Toland's message, the C–130 touched down at Don Muang. Within twenty-four hours, the pictures were in the hands of high government officials and were subsequently distributed to major newspapers and magazines. A year later, Toland received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his efforts that day.[8]

(S) Washington now realized that if the Soviet airlift continued at such a high level, it could stymie Phoumi's efforts to subdue Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. The Laotian general had earlier asked Sarit or the United States for T–6 aircraft, since the LAAF lacked both the pilots and planes to counter the airdrops. On December 23, Admiral Felt backed the request so that the RLG could develop a "minimum air capability" for controlling its own air space.[9]

(S) At this time, the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) had nearly fifty T–6 Harvard trainers that mounted .30-caliber machineguns and could carry light bombs and napalm. Marshal Sarit had already agreed to furnish "volunteer" Thai pilots in case the United States decided to equip the LAAF with these planes. Wanting to develop an indigenous Laotian capability, Admiral Felt proposed that Thailand provide Laos ten T–6s, plus pilot checkouts. As soon as five pilots were trained, Felt said, the RLG should announce that it would no longer tolerate intervention by foreign aircraft and that its pilots had been ordered to shoot them down. Even if these attacks did not "bag a few birds," Felt believed their presence would be sufficient to deter the Soviets from making further flights.[10]

(S) On December 27, Defense and State told CINCPAC to begin T–6 training while the American Embassy in Bangkok arranged to transfer ten RTAF T–6s and the CIA renegotiated its Air America contract for the necessary aircraft maintenance. There was one stipulation: none of these planes would be turned over to Phoumi unless he formally protested the Russian airlift in the United Nations and publicly stated he would take action unless it stopped. Ambassador Brown approved these moves, noting that the UN scenario was essential to legalize bringing strike aircraft into Laos.[11]

(S) On the day that State and Defense gave the green light to CINCPAC's T–6 plan, Toland's unarmed VC–47 was hit by enemy ground fire during a reconnaissance flight. On this flight, the VC–47 took photos of Samneua, Vang Vieng, and Dien Bien Phu airfields. Oblique photos of the North Vietnamese field were taken from Laos using K–7 and K–20 cameras equipped with telephoto lenses. No aircraft were found on the airstrip, but extensive resurfacing had occurred since the previous air attaché photos. Four days later, the aircraft sustained further damage but landed safely. On that flight, the crew reported an enemy convoy of over fifty trucks on or near the Plain of Jars. They also noticed that Vang Vieng's old airstrip had been lengthened to over four thousand feet and was being used by the Soviets as an airhead.[12]

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7. (S) Right after the landing of the first Soviet transport at Wattay, Kong Le cordoned off the airfield and refused admittance to all foreigners. Even so, Colonel Law used field glasses to spot the debarkation of the North Vietnamese gunners. He also took photos but, due to the extreme distance between his location and the unloading area, the personnel could not be identified as North Vietnamese nor the aircraft as Russian.

8. (S) Toland intvw, Nov 18, 1974; msg, USARMA Vientiane to SECSTATE, CX–A–2, 220856Z Dec 60.

9. (S) Msgs, PACAF to CINCPAC, 220107Z Dec 60, USARMA Vientiane to SECSTATE, CX–A–2, 220856Z Dec 60, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1033, Dec 17, 1960, CINCPAC to JCS, 232339Z Dec 60.

10. (S) Hist, PACAF, Jul-Dec 61, I, pt 2, 13–18; msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1044, Dec 17, 1960, CINCPAC to JCS, 232339Z Dec 60.

11. (S) Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 688, Dec 27, 1960, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1191, Dec 28, 1960.

12. (S) Msg, USARMA Vientiane to CSAF, CX–A–9, 271432Z Dec 1960; Toland intvw, Nov 18, 1974.

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The War in Northern Laos

(S) President Eisenhower ordered Felt to ready JTF 116 and dispatched a C–130 squadron from Stewart Air Force Base, Tennessee, to Clark. In Admiral Felt's opinion, this squadron "could be the one asset that will keep us from being caught between a rock and a hard place." Other C–130 units based in the United States moved to various continental embarkation stations. Simultaneously, all 315th Air Division courier flights were canceled; all training was scrubbed; and certain division troop carriers stood alert, waiting launch orders. Eisenhower also approved a transfer of four [redacted] B–26s from Taiwan to Bangkok and the rehabilitation of another four B–26s. By January 2, 1961—coincident with the RTG's agreement to turn over ten T–6s to the LAAF—JTF 116 was set for operations in Laos.[13] Six Laotian pilots previously trained in the T–6 at French flying schools were sent to Korat Air Base, Thailand, for their checkouts. Since it had been some time since the pilots had flown this aircraft, delays ensued when a few suffered air sickness during gunnery maneuvers. Meanwhile, the Joint Chiefs told CINCPAC to have the T–6s hit the communist air/ground logistic effort first, the hostile troops second. Such attacks would use rockets and machineguns; napalm and light bombs were withheld.[14]

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(S) The LAAF was denied the heavier ordnance because of a strong protest from Ambassador Brown. To begin with, Brown was miffed because he first learned from the Thai Ambassador to Laos—not from Washington—that the United States planned to introduce aerial bombs. Brown feared that if the LAAF was given bombs, the other side might bring in antiaircraft guns, a move that could result in losses of pilots and planes. Moreover, it might provoke a communist retaliation against Vientiane or the Air America airlift. Brown held that this would prove disastrous to the morale of an already jittery civilian population.[15]

(S) Brown's action aroused Admiral Felt, who suggested he leave the choice of weapons to the judgment of military authorities better suited to the task. With undisguised sarcasm, Felt noted that it never occurred to him that killing communists with bullets or rockets was any more humane than killing them with bombs. Nevertheless, Brown's views prevailed in Washington.[16]

(S) By January 7, the four [redacted] B–26s manned by Americans were at Takhli Air Base, Thailand. Three days later, the six Laotian pilots completed their six gunnery missions at Kokotiem and returned to Savannakhet along with four Thai "volunteer" pilots wearing Laotian insignia. That afternoon, the Boun Oum government delivered a note to the Soviet embassy protesting the Kong Le airlift. The Russians refused to accept it, however, on the grounds that they recognized only Souvanna Phouma as the *de jure* head of the Royal Laotian Government. Infuriated, Phoumi Nosavan ordered the LAAF to fly its first combat mission—an armed reconnaissance of Route 13 from the Lik River to the Vang Vieng airstrip.[17]

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(S) The J–2 (Intelligence) section of the PEO furnished the targets and complete flight plan for this first T–6 mission. Lt. Col. Joe Emory, a World War II A–26[18] pilot who did not join the

13. (S) Hist, PACAF, Jul-Dec 61, I, pt 2, 13–18; Eisenhower, pp 608–611; Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years, 1950–1965* (Ofc/AF Hist, 1981), p. 58; msg, USARMA Vientiane to CSAF, CX–A–9, 271432Z Dec 60; MR, Robert H. Knight, ASD/ISA, subj: Laos Meeting–31 December 1960, Dec 31, 1960.

14. (S) Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 65, 67–69; Maj John C. Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force, 1954–1970* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1970), p 5; msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 988339, 072101Z Jan 61, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 733, Jan 7, 1961; MR, Rear Adm Luther C. Heinz, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, subj: Meeting on 7 January—Laos Situation, Jan 18, 1961.

15. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1232, Jan 2, 1961, 1265, Jan 5, 1961.

16. [redacted] Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 070320Z Jan 61.

17. (S) Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 988336, 071344Z Jan 61; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 67–69; intvw, author with Col William H. Pietsch Jr., USAF, Ret, Jul 25, 1974. Pietsch served with the PEO/MAAG from January to August 1961 as an evaluation officer and senior military advisor for intelligence to the Royal Laotian Government.

18. [redacted] The Douglas Invader, a WW II attack aircraft, was initially designated A–26. When the Air Force dropped the attack category in 1948, the Invader was redesignated B–26 since the Martin B–26 Marauder had been withdrawn from service.

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Air Force when it became a separate service, worked out the details since he was the only J–2 member with air experience. The day before the flight was to take off, Emory and Lt. Col. William H. Pietsch, Jr. (Chief, J–2) loaded the Laotian and Thai pilots into a close air support C–45. The route was then flown, Emory and Pietsch pointing out the various navigational checkpoints and landmarks they wanted the pilots to see. Once in the general target area, the C–45's Chinese nationalist pilot flew the approach heading, diving against the target in a dry run pass. The aircraft then climbed back to altitude and returned to Vientiane.[19]

The first T–6 mission was unimpressive, however. Perhaps because the dry run tipped the government's hand, no Russian aircraft were sighted nor was any military traffic seen on the road. The pilots chose to expend their ordnance on two bridges in the area. "Jammed guns, unspent rockets, and aborts" was the way Colonel Law summed up the results. Trying to find a silver lining, General Heintges thought the very fact that the T–6s had gotten into the air and flown a strike mission would leave the communists uneasy.[20]

The poor showing of the LAAF prompted Admiral Felt to urge Heintges to schedule sorties into the Plain of Jars where intelligence reported Kong Le was receiving nearly fifty tons of supplies a day. CINCPAC wanted these "juicy targets" hit and told Heintges he expected reports soon to show that the T–6s were destroying more tonnage than the communists were supplying. He also ordered the Pacific Fleet (PACFLT) and PACAF each to send one experienced fighter-bomber pilot for temporary duty with the PEO. Adm. John Sides, USN, CINCPACFLT, immediately dispatched a Marine aviator to Vientiane; and Gen. Emmett O'Donnell, Jr., CINCPACAF, furnished an Air Force major for Savannakhet. Unfortunately, the latter officer came down with dysentery and spent most of the duty tour on his back. Meantime, the LAAF pilots claimed their first kills on January 14—two trucks near Vang Vieng. The victories were short lived; on January 17, one of the T–6s was shot down. The pilots soon complained of the aircraft's slow speed (140 knots) and the difficulty in making attacks with guns and rockets instead of bombs and napalm.[21]

Morale of the Laotian pilots hit bottom when PEO members and top-ranking officers openly criticized their ability. Such criticism seemed justified based on the results achieved, while in reality it underscored the ignorance of air matters that were inherent in the PEO and the FAL, both dominated by ground force personnel. They did not appreciate the fact that a tactical air arm, no matter how small, could not be created overnight. The pilots had flown the T–6 before, but they had no previous combat experience and little or no training in tactics or tactical operations. Their most recent flying was confined to liaison aircraft or C–47s, and the Thai checkout, which took less than a week, hardly qualified them as strike pilots. The program was actually a half measure that hoped to achieve quick results in operational performance. Like most "get rich quick schemes," it had ended in failure. Furthermore, the T–6 aircraft (designed in 1937) bordered on the obsolete.

Thus, if Washington wanted to expand the composite squadron by adding an attack component, an accompanying training program and upgrading of equipment were vital. The latter need was met by funding fourteen T–28s (configured for ground support) in the MAP budget for

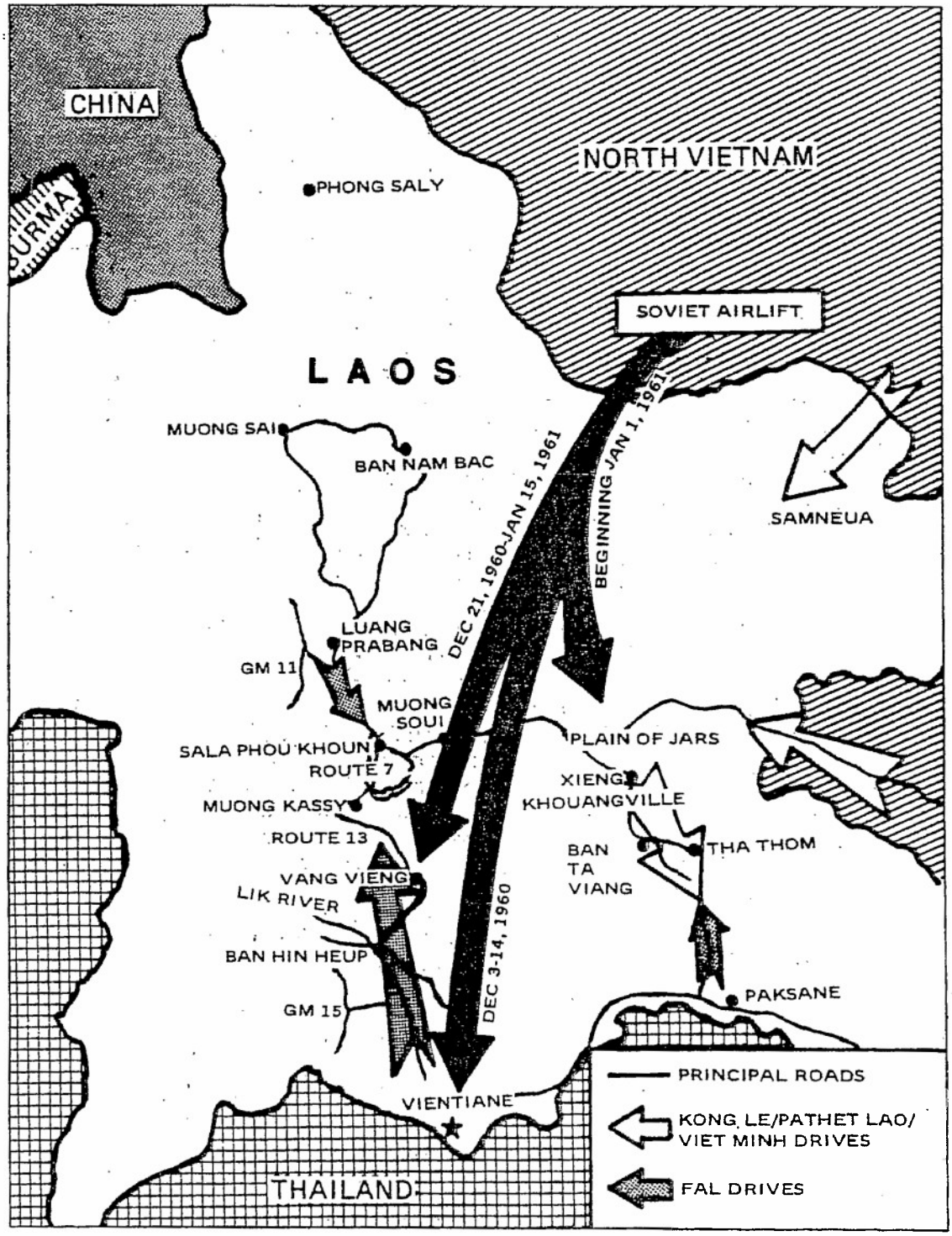
19. Pietsch intvw, Jul 25, 1974.

20. *Ibid*; msgs, USARMA Vientiane to CSAF, Jan 11, 1961, CHPEO Vientiane to SECSTATE, 258, 111555Z Jan 61.

21. Msgs, CINCPAC to CHPEO, 131040Z Jan 61, to CINCPACFLT, PACAF, Jan 13, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 67–69; intvw, author with Col Ronald G. Shaw, Kelly AFB, Tex., Jan 22, 1975. As a captain, Shaw served with the PEO/MAAG during November 1960–November 1961 as a maintenance advisor to Maj Thao Ma, chief of the Laotian Army Air Force. Prior to the January 17 flight, the PEO recommended lifting the restriction on the use of bombs. CINCPAC agreed, but Washington took no action, presumably because of Ambassador Brown's continued objections. [Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, 68.]

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Laos. General O'Donnell proposed two to three weeks ground school, then thirty to forty hours in light aircraft to train the Laotian pilots. This would be followed by transition to the T–6 for twenty to thirty hours. O'Donnell's proposal was endorsed by Admiral Felt; and though a step in the right direction, it was barely adequate. However, once the poor condition of the LAAF was recognized, a thorough and comprehensive instructional program was adopted.[22]

After seizing Vientiane, Phoumi Nosavan became embroiled in politics and turned over the pursuit of Kong Le to Maj. Gen. Bounleuth Sanichan. The latter was soon afflicted with what Abraham Lincoln, speaking of Gen. George B. McClellan, called the "slows;" and Kong Le was able to withdraw northward into the mountains around Vang Vieng. Even though he was supported by the Soviet airlift and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops, his position was still vulnerable. Recognizing this, the FAL general staff suggested a north-south pincers to encircle his forces. The plan called for *Groupe Mobile*[23] (GM) 15 to move up Route 13 while GM 11 advanced on Kong Le from Luang Prabang, simultaneously securing the strategic road junction of Sala Phou Khoun. At this junction, Route 13 meets Route 7 emerging westward from the Plain of Jars.[24]

However, Kong Le and the North Vietnamese struck first. In late December, NVA units secured Samneua Province as another estimated five battalions advanced toward the Plain of Jars. The region was only lightly defended by widely dispersed volunteer companies, Meo tribesmen, and a single battalion of infantry at Xieng Khouangville, whose FAL commander was an officer stubbornly set in the French blockhouse-type strategy of fixed defenses. On December 31, the North Vietnamese spearhead approaching from the east was coordinated with a sudden Soviet airlift of Kong Le's paratroopers from the west. Having failed to send out patrols, the FAL commander was caught by surprise. His troops bolted and retreated in disorder to Tha Thom and Paksane, abandoning most of their supplies to the attackers. Paratroopers dropped by Phoumi on January 3 to restore the situation became scattered in the rugged terrain and eventually joined the panic. Air America was quickly summoned to extract the U.S. advisors. The one bright spot was Lt. Col. Vang Pao, commander of the Meo irregulars, who conducted an orderly evacuation of his men to the surrounding mountains. By the end of the first week in January, Kong Le had thwarted FAL attempts to eliminate his forces, linked up with the North Vietnamese, and controlled all of north-central Laos from Vang Vieng to Samneua. Assisted by the Soviet airlift and his allies,[25] he set about transforming the Plain of Jars into a formidable stronghold. However, when Kong Le showed no signs of further southward movement, CINCPAC reduced the alert status of JTF 116.[26]

Undaunted by the loss of the plain and Samneua Province, Phoumi pushed the two-prong attack on the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. Vang Vieng fell on January 16, depriving the antigovernment forces of their forward airhead and considerable stockpiled material. From Vang Vieng northward, however, land mines, felled trees, and the rugged terrain slowed the advance. On top of this, the T–6 pilots refused to attack Kong Le's flak-defended positions on the Plain of Jars. Phoumi then requested the United States to employ the [redacted] B–26 light

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22. Msg, CINCPAC to CHPEO, 110305Z Jan 61; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 68–69; rprt, AIRA Saigon, Semiannual Updating FWAIS S–3632, Aug 1, 1961; msg, PACAF to CINCPAC, 010435Z Jan 61.

23. Normally three infantry battalions and one 105-mm howitzer battery.

24. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p 29; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 47.

25. Members of the French Military Mission on the Plain of Jars reported that Kong Le was busy forming new battalions from FAL deserters and prisoners of war. Relations between him and the Pathet Lao were strained. Although their forces were cooperating, Kong Le had retained his separate identity. He would not integrate his battalions into Pathet Lao units, but the Pathet Lao were said to be burgeoning in influence among Kong Le's soldiers. [Msg, AmEmb Paris to SECSTATE, 2486, Jan 17, 1961.]

26. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, pp D–19, D–20; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 65; msg, AmEmb Paris to SECSTATE, 2846, Jan 17, 1961.

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bombers against these defenses. Before these new planes were introduced, Brig. Gen. Andrew J. Boyle, USA, who succeeded Heintges as PEO chief in January, and Admiral Felt wanted better use made of the T–6s. Since the Harvards were limited to fifteen seconds of machinegun fire and two rockets—often fired on the same strafing pass—Boyle and Felt asked that the restriction on bombs and napalm be removed. They stressed that this ordnance would be used strictly for military targets and not against cities or civilians.[27]

Ambassador Brown still objected to lifting the restrictions, believing it would spark retaliatory air strikes by North Vietnam or China against Laotian airfields. If the enemy attacked the LAAF or the Air America transport fleet, Phoumi would be crippled because his troops were completely dependent on airlift for movement, materiél support, and food. The United States would then be forced to introduce interceptors to regain control of the air. The ambassador viewed the U.S. (but not the communist) steps as escalation and direly predicted that a single machinegun run on Wattay would panic the civilian population and force Vientiane's evacuation. As could be expected, Felt took strong exception to these views, holding them to be completely unrealistic.[28]

The Kennedy administration had been in office for just a few days and was not anxious to exacerbate the situation between Brown and Felt—especially when the ambassador considered the introduction of napalm and bombs to be a trigger for escalation. It elected to postpone any decision for the time being. President John F. Kennedy preferred a political solution for Laos, favoring neutralization over the Dulles effort to turn the country into a pro-Western bastion.

The nagging feeling persisted that Laos was the key to Southeast Asia and that, if it fell to the communists, the entire area would soon follow. This was the "domino theory" strongly emphasized to Kennedy in a briefing given him by outgoing President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Christian A. Herter on January 19. Consequently, the new President was in a quandary. Had the previous administration's assessment been correct? Might he be forced to eventually go in there and fight it out as Eisenhower warned? The thought of American troops tangled in an Asian land war was distasteful to Kennedy, his advisers, and the Joint Chiefs. Nevertheless, American prestige was so heavily involved that Kennedy was determined not to accept "any visible humiliation over Laos."[29]

In his first press conference on January 25, the new President offered a face-saving statement: while he was firm on the kingdom keeping its independence, a Laos uncommitted to either side in the cold war was acceptable. The President directed Walt W. Rostow of the White House staff to form an interdepartmental task force (later called the Laos Working Group) to furnish alternative courses of action as well as daily briefings on the Laos situation. The U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh was also directed to keep a closer liaison with the exiled Souvanna Phouma.[30]

Back in Laos, Phoumi attempted an airborne assault against the Kong Le/Pathet Lao forces dug in on the Plain of Jars. The PEO had opposed the scheme, but the general and his

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27. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 65, 68–69; msgs, CHPEO Laos to CINCPAC, 332, 181011Z Jan 61, CINCPAC to SECSTATE, 182058Z Jan 61; intvw, author with Lt Gen Andrew J. Boyle, USA, Ret, Sep 18, 1974.

28. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 68–69; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1422, Jan 27, 1961; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.

29. MR, SECSTATE Christian A. Herter, subj: Briefing of President-Elect Kennedy, Jan 19, 1961; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965; Fawcett World, 1977), pp 307–09; Hilsman, pp 127–29; Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, 1965), p 640; memo, Clark M. Clifford to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, subj: Memorandum of Conference on January 19, 1961, between President Eisenhower and President-Elect Kennedy on the Subject of Laos, Sep 29, 1967, in *The Senator Gravel Edition, The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, 4 vols (Boston, 1971), II, 635–37, Doc 97 [hereafter cited as *Gravel Pentagon Papers*].

30. *Ibid*; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Phnom Penh, 662, Feb 1, 1961.

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field commanders were showing a marked disinclination to accept American advice.[31] The attack faltered when the two parachute companies involved in the assault failed to receive sufficient aerial resupply. The luckless paratroopers were forced to fight their way out of the plain, and Phoumi's offensive ended.[32]

Phoumi's debacle brought other means of attacking Kong Le and the Pathet Lao into focus, refueling the ordnance debate between the military and the U.S. ambassador. By now, aerial reconnaissance had uncovered many suitable targets on the plain, notably motor convoys, supply dumps, and enemy armor. This intensified reconnaissance stemmed from a JCS suggestion that the Royal Thai Air Force supply two unmarked RT–33s with volunteer pilots for missions deep inside Laos. At first, Sarit was lukewarm to the proposal. He believed these planes would need defensive escorts and that USAF high-performance aircraft were better. In early January, Washington assured him that equal or better aircraft would replace any losses and that it would rebut any international criticism of the Royal Thailand Government. More important, if this action touched off an assault from an outside power, the United States would "act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes." With these assurances, Sarit gave his approval.[33]

The limited RTAF photoprocessing facilities were soon saturated. On January 11, the USAF 67th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron, located at Yokota Air Base, Japan, supplemented the Thai effort with two photo interpreters, a lab technician, and additional equipment and film. Special photointelligence reports were prepared after each RT–33 sortie and after the continuing VC–47 missions. These reports were distributed to many agencies, including the JCS, CINCPAC and his component commanders, the PEO, Headquarters USAF, and, when appropriate, to General Phoumi.[34]

The greatest impetus, however, came when the Air Force transferred an SC–47 from Korea that had been operating along the line dividing the two Koreas. This aircraft carried a K–38 camera (twenty-four-inch or thirty-six-inch focal length) and a one-hundred-inch long-range oblique camera. It confirmed General Boyle's prediction that many of the targets could be successfully hit—provided the prohibition against bombs and napalm were lifted. Moreover, since the Laotian pilots were ineffective, Boyle wanted Thai volunteers to fly the T–6 Harvards.[35] Detection would be avoided by stationing the men at remote flying fields, such as Thakhek, through an agreement already reached by Sarit and Phoumi.[36]

Ambassador Brown, although he forwarded Boyle's recommendations, disagreed with them. He continued to believe these actions would escalate the conflict, since the enemy would speedily answer any air attacks that employed bombs or napalm. Use of the latter, he asserted, had a "particularly bad odor for Laos and the world generally." Furthermore, the planes still had to attack areas defended by antiaircraft guns, and replacing the Laotian pilots would only help

31. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p D–32; rprt, AIRA Saigon, Semi-annual FWAIS Capabilities—Laos, Mar 22, 1961; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.

32. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p D–32.

33. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 69–70; msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1158, Jan 2, 1961, 1214, Jan 9, 1961, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 733, Jan 7, 1961.

34. Hist, 5th AF, Jan-Jun 61, I, 124; msg, CINCPAC to CHJUSMAGTHAI, 110330Z Jan 61.

35. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 69–70; Capt Mark E. Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961–1966* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), p 1; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1593, Feb 27, 1961; Background Paper, Dir/Plans, USAF, USAF Aerial Reconnaissance in Laos, Aug 23, 1962; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.

36. The original proposal, worked out between Boyle and Phoumi, called for 390 volunteers, including not only pilots and ground crews, but also doctors, other medics, radio operators, and parachute riggers. Sarit agreed to fill most of this shopping list. On March 2, 1961, the first shipment of Thai volunteers, funded by the United States through the PEO, was in Laos. [Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, 113.]

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the T–6 operations marginally. There was no reason to think the Thai would be any more enthusiastic about hitting such targets than would the Laotians. In a very prophetic statement, Brown concluded "we must accept the fact that the war is going to be long and conducted under certain limitations imposed by larger considerations."[37]

On the touchy bombs/napalm question, Brown was supported by Dean Rusk, the new Secretary of State, but opposed by Robert S. McNamara, the new Secretary of Defense. At a March 12 meeting of high State, Defense, and CIA officials, McNamara again stated the long-standing Defense position: the T–6 should be allowed to attack any military target and use whatever ordnance the military men on the scene deemed necessary. Seeing that a meeting was set the next day with President Kennedy to discuss the recent downturn of events in Laos, the conferees agreed it was best to leave the decision to him.[38]

The meeting of March 13 was prompted by the disaster suffered that week by Phoumi's forces. A Pathet Lao counteroffensive from the Plain of Jars swept east and wiped out the gains made by the government forces over the two previous months.[39] These startling enemy advances spurred the Joint Chiefs and the Rostow task force into action. Because the chiefs wanted no part of a limited war like that in Korea, only materiél, financial, and perhaps covert advisory/combat assistance could be given. Three days after the enemy offensive began, the service heads suggested five steps to assist the FAL. First, base sixteen "sterile" B–26 light bombers in Thailand to interdict enemy supply lines, dumps, and installations and contract with Air America to maintain these aircraft. Second, turn over sixteen additional H–34 helicopters to Air America at Udorn, Thailand, as well as four C–130s, three DC–4s, and a C–47. Third, augment FAL artillery support by securing four 105-mm howitzer batteries from Marshal Sarit. Fourth, increase the Meo irregulars from three thousand to four thousand by April 1. Finally, augment both the PEO and the Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand (JUSMAGTHAI) by one hundred officers and men.[40]

At the March 13 meeting—also attended by Felt and Boyle—President Kennedy approved all of these recommendations under the code word Millpond. The Defense Department was tasked with supplying the CIA with sixteen H–34s for bailment to Air America along with the transport aircraft. For the transports' crews, it was suggested the CIA employ U.S. civilians and Chinese nationalist personnel. Defense was to select sixteen helicopter pilots and furnish maintenance support for the aircraft. Admiral Felt wanted to increase the crew ratio from one pilot per helicopter to two. This was turned down, but another CINCPAC proposal—that the pilots be selected from the Marine Corps—was approved. (As it turned out, half the pilots were Marines with the other half coming from the Army and Navy). Before the leathernecks reported to Laos, however, they were to be sheep-dipped, meaning given civilian clothes, civilian identification, and a suitable cover story.[41]

After their return to Honolulu, Boyle asked Felt if the H–34s might be equipped with rockets and machineguns to deliver suppressive fire in support of the FAL. Deeming the suggestion impractical, CINCPAC pointed out the doubtful advantages of such arming would be more than offset by the decreased lift from the extra weight. He added that the B–26s could supply any suppressive fire needed.[42]

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37. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1593, Feb 27, 1961.
38. Memo of conversation, reps fr Dept of State, DOD, CIA, USIA, and White House, subj: Situation in Laos, Mar 12, 1961.
39. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p 132; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 76; Futrell, p 127.
40. Stf study for CJCS, Concept for Recapture of the Plaine des Jarres, Mar 10, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 78–80.
41. *Ibid*; msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 991705, Mar 11, 1961, 991727, Mar 13, 1961.
42. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 79–80.

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[redacted]

The B–26 deployment presented problems. Eight of these old World War II/Korean War light bombers were already in [redacted] Taiwan. The Air Force was ready to supply the remainder. Yet, the agency could crew just four of the aircraft and figured it would take from four to eight weeks to train volunteer pilots [redacted] On the other hand, USAF volunteers could man four of the bombers in about ten days and all sixteen in two to three weeks. President Kennedy directed the use of USAF personnel who, like the marines, would be sanitized or sheep-dipped. (Eventually, the Air Force furnished all sixteen crews and aircraft.) Disagreement arose within the military over the timing of the first B–26 strikes once the planes were in place. The JCS wanted to have at least eight B–26s in Thailand before any targets were struck. Felt argued their use should not be based on numbers of planes but on the availability of targets, which Boyle had in abundance. All agreed that the first priority should be supply dumps, armor, heavy weapons, and enemy transport. Support of ground forces would be secondary.[43]

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The State Department remained reluctant to introduce this new equipment, terming it escalation. Secretary Rusk, in particular, was not as enthusiastic as others over air power's value. Earlier, at a January 23 meeting, he had voiced the view that the Royal Laotian Government controlled the large cities, road junctions, and supply centers; and these offered far better targets for bombing than enemy forces operating in mountainous, jungle terrain. Drawing on his World War II experience in the China-Burma-India theater, he contended that a handful of light bombers operating over such terrain would neither deter Kong Le and the Pathet Lao nor inflict serious damage. If air power failed, it would leave the administration no choice but to introduce U.S. ground forces. Rusk was overruled and deployment planning went forward. In fact, Secretary McNamara was told to start preparing an additional sixteen B–26s using sanitized USAF crews.

All the same, State had an ace in the hole. The B–26 transfer pivoted on the premise that the prohibition against bombs and napalm would soon be lifted. No matter how hard the services tried, it was not until 1963 that these restrictions were removed and then only partially.[44]

Marshal Sarit was not keen about stationing some three hundred H–34 personnel or placing more B–26s in Thailand. Either deployment, he calculated, could elicit a sharp reaction from North Vietnam or China, possibly air strikes against Udorn or Takhli. The Thai Army's antiaircraft guns were outmoded, and the only modern air defense planes held by the RTAF were a squadron of F8F Bearcats and one of F–86 Sabres. The latter had just been delivered and the pilots were not yet proficient. In light of the state of the FAL, Sarit wondered whether they could exploit the B–26 strikes. Yet, he hinted to U. Alexis Johnson, Ambassador to Thailand, his willingness to approve the deployment if the United States stationed its antiaircraft batteries and interceptors in Thailand.

Ambassador Johnson knew Washington was not ready for this step. To set Sarit's mind at ease, he underscored the foolhardiness of the North Vietnamese attacking Thailand at the risk of the Seventh Fleet's retaliation. Johnson also assured Sarit (following Rusk's instructions) that if and when the United States sent forces to defend Laos, USAF fighters would be positioned in Thailand. In addition, Sarit would be counseled before any B–26s were launched. Thus satisfied, the Thai general gave his approval a few days later.[45]

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43. Unnumbered JCS plan, Concept for the Recapture of the Plaine des Jarres, Mar 9, 1961; msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 991705, Mar 11, 1961, 991727, Mar 13, 1961, 99240, Mar 20, 1961.

44. Rprt, State-Defense-CIA Task Force on Laos, no subj, n.d., atch to memo, Paul H. Nitze, ASD/ISA, to SECDEF, subj: White House Meeting on Laos (January 23, 1961), Jan 23, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 80–81; Hilsman, p 128; MR, William P. Bundy, Dep ASD/ISA, subj: Discussion of Laos at White House Meeting (from Mr. Nitze's notes), Mar 21, 1961; memo, SECDEF to JCS, Mar 13, 1961.

45. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1647, Mar 16, 1961, SECSTATE to AmEmb Bangkok, 1442, Mar 21, 1961, 1531, Apr 4, 1961, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1806, Apr 6, 1961.

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The War in Northern Laos

The most significant and far-reaching decision President Kennedy made on March 13 was to expand the Meo tribesmen program from three thousand to four thousand men. As noted, the Meo were a semi-independent mountain people numbering about two hundred thousand whose main agricultural product was the opium poppy. They lived chiefly in Xieng Khouang, Phong Saly, and Samneua Provinces and the hilltops surrounding the Plain of Jars, while another group lived in North Vietnam. The Meo had no written language, and the Lao regarded them as savages. Even so, they had acquired a reputation as a pragmatic, opportunistic people who would fight to protect their families, clans, and opium fields from outside intruders.[46]

During the closing days of World War II, the Free French parachuted in commandos and, on a minor scale, began organizing, training, and supplying the tribes for guerrilla action against the Japanese. When the Indochina war broke out, many Meo remained loyal to the French. Others sided with Ho Chi Minh, and they often fought against one another. For example, the Phou Phathi stronghold in Samneua Province defied all communist assaults before the cease-fire of 1954. When it was finally taken during the 1959 summer crisis, it was by Meo allied with the Pathet Lao.[47]

Their fighting qualities aside, the Meo living in Laos had several drawbacks. They were poorly equipped and devoid of any tactical organization above company level. Being locally oriented, they generally refused to fight outside the immediate vicinity of their hillside villages. An exception to this rule would be in response to an outstanding ethnic leader whose ability they respected, such as Lt. Col. Vang Pao, now the military commander of Xieng Khouang Province.[48]

As early as mid-1959, combat operations in northeastern Laos had created thousands of Meo refugees. Consideration at that time was given to training some of them as irregulars; but since the French were solely responsible for tactical training, this could not be done. When the civil war erupted, however, the French ceased all training and withdrew to their air base at Seno. Subsequent events showed the Meo as the one force in Military Region II that could resist the Pathet Lao, and attention again focused on the tribesmen. Their command structure was reorganized, and they were eventually trained and equipped for intelligence gathering and paramilitary operations in the enemy's rear. Vang Pao welcomed this development, for it meshed with his desire to weaken clan and village loyalties and concentrate his people into larger political units.[49]

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The embassy tried to secure more support for the Meo; but due to long-standing jealousies between Meo and Lao, Phoumi rejected these attempts. He claimed that the Meo were

46. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 85; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE 306, subj: Reports on Two Field Trips in Northern Laos by U.S. Personnel, n.d. [ca late Feb 60]; Alfred W. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York, 1972), p 84.
47. Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 46; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1235, Jan 2, 1961.
48. *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, pp C–29, C–30; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, A–65, Aug 30, 1971.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Air War In Northern Laos, 1 Apr–30 Nov 1971* (HQ PACAF: Project CHECO, 1973)]
51. Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974; msgs, [redacted] to Washington, 1951, Jan 6, 1961, 2118 [ca Jan 611, CINCPAC to JCS, 060117Z Jan 61, CIA to JCS, 64317, Jan 18, 1961.

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primitive, untrustworthy, and their leaders had hoodwinked the United States by making promises they could not keep. All support must be through the FAL, which Phoumi declared was meeting Meo needs. The Americans knew this statement was absurd, for the FAL logistic pipeline was practically worthless. If the country team gave in, supplies would never get to the tribesmen. Still, because of Phoumi's military following and strong anticommunist policy, the issue was not pressed.[52]

Nevertheless, by the March 13 meeting in Washington, everyone—including Phoumi—saw that it would be almost impossible for the FAL to defeat Kong Le and his allies without U.S. or other friendly power intervention. Further, Phoumi's political activities and his stubborn refusal to accept advice from the PEO had put him in disfavor with Ambassador Brown and the State Department. With his military position shaky, a more pliable Phoumi endorsed the increase in Meo strength to four thousand men, and President Kennedy added his blessing. [redacted] it began shipping in carbines, grenades, mortars, antipersonnel mines, and other sabotage equipment as fast as possible. The ceiling was later increased to six thousand men; and toward the end of April, about five thousand Meo had been armed.[53] These troops soon became known as *L'Armée Clandestine*.[54] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA

The day after President Kennedy authorized additional support to the RLG, Phoumi unexpectedly flew to Phnom Penh to seek an accord with Souvanna. The Laotian general was anxious to stop the fighting and confident he could persuade Souvanna to join Boun Oum's government and drop his claim as the legitimate prime minister. As bait, Phoumi dangled the position of vice premier plus the foreign affairs portfolio. Souvanna turned him down, although the two men eventually issued a joint statement cautiously endorsing a fourteen nation conference to end the civil war.[55]

After returning to Vientiane, a discouraged Phoumi dug in and threw up defensive positions south of the Lik River. Boyle and Felt wanted him to counterattack because the enemy seemed more intent on threatening Luang Prabang. The mercurial Phoumi quickly perked up, replaced some of his incompetent commanders, and ordered the general staff to plan for retaking the lost territory. Boyle hoped he would pass this newfound determination down the chain of command and bolster flagging army morale. It was wishful thinking—after satisfying himself that his staff (with the aid of PEO planners) was preparing to regain Muong Kassy and Sala Phou Khoun, Phoumi took a seven-day political junket with the king.[56]

The Laotian ship of state appeared to be drifting aimlessly; and unless Washington acted, many deemed a communist takeover a certainty. However, President Kennedy evinced no enthusiasm for committing U.S. troops and still counted on a diplomatic solution. He was chiefly disturbed over the prospect of fighting for a people who, it seemed, did not care to defend themselves. Yet, at a March 20 meeting of the National Security Council, he was given two troop proposals. One called for sending a small contingent to Thailand's Mekong Valley, seeking to deter the Pathet Lao and serve as an incentive to negotiate over fear of U.S. intervention. This plan assumed Moscow could "turn the local boys off [anytime] it wanted to"—a questionable

52. *Ibid.*

53. Both the Meo and Kha tribesmen were organized into *Auto Defense* or militia units entirely separate from the FAL. These were broken down into *Auto Defense de Choc* (ADC) and *Auto Defense Ordinaire* (ADO). Of the two, ADC companies were better trained and paid and had more military experience. ADO units rarely fought outside their own locales; but ADC units could be sent, usually by helicopter, to any area in northern Laos. [Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, 110.] The Kha received mainly conventional training, while the Meo were instructed in partisan/guerrilla tactics. [Baldwin, p 312.]

54. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 992064, Mar 17, 1961, 994593, Apr 21, 1961.

55. Dommen, pp 186–87; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 75–76.

56. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 78–79, 84; msg, CHPEO Laos to CINCPAC, DA IN 94444, Mar 18, 1961.

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assumption. The Joint Chiefs argued that such action would merely encourage North Vietnam and China to take bigger slices of the pie. They countered with a plan calling for up to sixty thousand men, complete with air cover and nuclear weapons.[57]

The inclusion of nuclear weapons by the military was a legacy of the Korean War. To the chiefs, it was unthinkable for the United States to embark on another conventional, strength-sapping war. If American GIs had to fight, it should be to win. If this meant striking at the enemy's heartland, then one should not shirk from this decision. Essentially, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were saying that, once the administration opted for intervention, the "how" should be left up to them.[58]

President Kennedy held back from accepting either of the two proposals. Certain precautionary moves were authorized, however. The commander of JTF 116[59] was to assemble and activate his staff, and the task force was placed in increased readiness. Included were two regiments and the headquarters of the 3d Marine Division and Marine Air Group 16 (around fifteen thousand to twenty thousand men). United States Army troops included nineteen hundred men of the 2d Airborne Battle Group and three hundred of the 1st Special Forces Group.[60] Admiral Felt directed Admiral Sides to divert the aircraft carriers USS *Lexington*, USS *Midway*, and supporting craft into the South China Sea. The carrier USS *Bennington* steamed to about one hundred miles south of Bangkok to be in position should the ship's helicopters be committed. On March 21, the 315th Air Division began a three-day airlift of personnel and equipment attached to Marine Air Group 16 at Okinawa. The marines landed at Udorn, established a helicopter base, and turned over sixteen H–34s to Air America (the President's Millpond directive), including ten Army, ten Navy, and seventeen Marine pilots. [redacted] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA B–26s arrived at Takhli with four more on the way from Taiwan. Once in Thailand, however, [redacted] the aircraft would "marry up with volunteer USAF crews from the U.S."[61]

On March 23, while these military actions were taking place, President Kennedy held a televised news conference. With three large maps as a backdrop, the President noted that the Soviet airlift for Kong Le totalled over one thousand sorties and that there could be no peaceful solution unless this and other external support were withdrawn. Otherwise, he continued in somewhat graver tones, "those who support a genuinely neutral Laos will have to consider their response." So that no one misunderstood the U.S. position, he closed by stressing the need for a "truly neutral government, not a cold war pawn."[62]

A flurry of diplomatic activity, aimed at achieving a cease-fire, came in the wake of this news conference. Kennedy secured the backing of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's prime minister, then flew to Key West, Florida, for a meeting with Harold Macmillan, Britain's prime minister. Though Macmillan doubted the wisdom of any western military intervention in Laos, he reluctantly agreed to a limited move if necessary. The two leaders concluded by issuing a call for a cease-fire and a new Geneva conference. The President flew back to Washington where he talked at great length with Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, emphasizing the point that too many wars in history had been the result of miscalculation and that Moscow must not misjudge U.S. determination. In New Delhi, roving Ambassador W. Averell Harriman met

57. Schlesinger, pp 309–311; Hilsman, p 131.
58. Hilsman, p 129.
59. The Commanding General, 3d Marine Division, was still designated Commander, JTF 116, until a U.S. Army officer could be appointed SEATO Field Force commander.
60. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 84; Dommen, p 189.
61. Hists, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 47, 315th AD, Jan-Jun 61, II, Docs I, N; memo, Lt Gen Thomas J. H. Trapnell, USA, to CJCS, subj: Laos, Mar 28, 1961, atch to JCSM–206–61, Laos, Mar 31, 1961.
62. Schlesinger, p 311; Dommen, p 190.

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Souvanna Phouma, now embarking on a world tour to enlist support for his proposed fourteen nation conference. Harriman was aware of Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown's high regard for the prince and was impressed when Souvanna told him that neither he nor the Laotian people wanted a communist country. Laos could be saved, he stressed, but only as a neutral state with a tripartite government of neutralists, Pathet Lao, and supporters of Boun Oum and Phoumi. Souvanna declared that while he was prepared to head such a government, time was running out.[63]

(S) Souvanna's closing remarks to Harriman seemed an ominous warning. On the day President Kennedy held his televised news conference, North Vietnamese troops spearheaded a Pathet Lao attack against Kham Keut, signaling an enemy offensive into the Laotian panhandle. The next day, the reconnaissance SC–47, which had flown nearly fifty missions and furnished excellent photointelligence on enemy movements, was shot down over the Plain of Jars. The sole survivor was the assistant Army attaché from Saigon. General LeMay temporarily suspended all aerial reconnaissance. Then, toward the end of March, Phoumi's soldiers abandoned Tha Thom and withdrew down Highway 4 toward Paksane. In trying to cover the "completely uncontrolled retreat," the LAAF lost another T–6.[64] The LAAF had now lost five of the original ten T–6s transferred from the RTAF. However, seven qualified T–6 pilots were available, and three more were scheduled to complete training in Thailand by April 1.[65]

(S) The downward spiral of Laotian military fortunes continued through the next month. In a surprise move on April 3 and 4, the Russians dropped Kong Le's paratroopers west of Vang Vieng. This threat to Route 13 came just as an operation planned by the PEO to sever enemy-held Muong Kassy from its Plain of Jars supply base was getting under way. With the T–6s flying cover, seven C–47s and fourteen of the recently arrived H–34 helicopters shifted 640 government troops to positions east of the town. Although the airlift came off without a hitch, the operation ended in failure when the FAL troops once more proved unwilling to close with the enemy. A major newspaper noted, "It has become clear to observers here that the Laotian army . . . has no will to fight."[66]

(S) Meanwhile, by April 3, all sixteen Millpond B–26s [redacted] eight by the Air Force) and their sanitized USAF crews were at Takhli. As part of their cover, the crews were "hired" by a newly founded "firm" in Bangkok. General LeMay asked that the bombers be put into action without delay. He believed the State Department's diplomatic overtures toward the Russians would drag on unless the United States showed willingness to back Phoumi with air strikes. LeMay also wanted to use the recent SC–47 loss as justification for some sort of retaliation. "As long as we don't do anything about our people getting killed," the Air Force Chief warned, "this type of action will be continued by rebel groups with impunity." Defense Secretary McNamara opposed using the B–26s just then, his decision being affirmed at an April 13 White House meeting. President Kennedy did say he would permit the planes to take off should the Pathet Lao execute a serious ground action against the FAL.[67]

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA

(S) Besides the Millpond B–26s, the sixteen additional bombers McNamara had ordered to be readied were expected to be available by April 18. Two of them would be "recce birds," reconfigured [redacted] and flown by USAF crews. These two RB–26s left the United States in mid-April, but the remaining fourteen aircraft were kept stateside for an emergency.[68]

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA

63. (S) Schlesinger, pp 312–14; Hilsman, p 310; msgs, AmEmb New Delhi to SECSTATE, 2144, Mar 23, 1961, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1032, Mar 27, 1961.
64. (S) Dommen, p 188; Background Paper, Dir/Plans, USAF, Aug 23, 1962; JCS Laos SITREPs 87–61 to 90–61, Apr 1–4, 1961; Toland intvw, Nov 18, 1974.
65. (S) Msg, Ch/PEO to CINCPAC, Apr 1, 1961.
66. (S) Fall, *Anatomy of a Crisis*, p 206; *New York Times*, Apr 18, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 91.
67. (S) *Ibid*, p 18; JCSM–206–61, Laos, Mar 31, 1961; MR, Rear Adm Luther C. Heinz, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, subj: State–JCS Meeting, 14 Apr 1961, Apr 15, 1961.
68. (S) JCSM–206–61, Laos, Mar 31, 1961.

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There were several other deployments. MATS C–124s airlifted a control and reporting center from Clark to Don Muang Airport north of Bangkok during April 15–17. For air defense of the Thai capital, the Clark-based 510th Tactical Fighter Squadron deployed a detachment of six F–100s. Needless to say, Marshal Sarit was delighted with this action by CINCPAC and the Air Force.[69]

That week, the Kennedy administration suffered a severe blow to its prestige—the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. There is no doubt that the failure to support the Cuban exiles shaped President Kennedy's decisions on Laos. He was determined that his restraint in Cuba was not going to be construed as a lack of resolution elsewhere. On April 20, JTF 116 and its air component were redesignated part of the SEATO Field Force, and a naval flotilla steamed into the Gulf of Siam. In a more far-reaching decision that day, Kennedy converted the Programs Evaluation Office into Military Assistance Advisory Group, Laos.[70] Accompanying this change was the authorization for U.S. personnel to put on their uniforms[71] and move out into the field with the demoralized FAL. Since they were primarily advisors, the Americans were not to participate in combat unless such action was forced upon them.[72]

Converting the PEO to a MAAG was not a spur-of-the-moment decision. Ever since the war in Laos began heating up, Defense and the JCS were worried over the absence of legal protection for the "civilians" in the PEO. Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric was concerned that if such personnel were captured, they could well be treated as unlawful belligerents or as spies. However, as members of the U.S. armed forces openly advising the Laotians, they would be in a better position to receive treatment as prisoners of war. Besides, Gilpatric believed that recent events in Laos had partly lifted the PEO cover, and completely removing it would convince the Soviets that Washington meant business. Ambassador Brown also favored the change—it would show the Russians (who had been delaying their response to behind-the-scenes overtures for a cease-fire) that the American eagle held arrows as well as olive branches in its claws. None of this seemed to have fazed Kong Le or the Pathet Lao. They later rendezvoused and, on the 23d, easily captured Vang Vieng.[73]

The gravity with which the country team viewed the fall of Vang Vieng was reflected in Ambassador Brown's temporary reversal of his long-standing ban on heavy ordnance. Although not convinced bombs would achieve major military results other than boosting FAL morale, Brown asked for standby authority on April 23 to arm the B–26s with them. The aircraft

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69. Hists, 5th Comm & Con Gp, Jan-Jun 61, p 7, 5th FW, Jan-Jun 61, p 18; msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1828, Apr 10, 1961.

70. It was a busy day for President Kennedy. He later met with former Vice President Richard M. Nixon, and after discussing Cuba the conversation turned to Laos. Nixon urged Kennedy to take some affirmative action there, at least a commitment of American air power. The President's answer shows the impact the Bay of Pigs had on his thinking. "I just don't think we should get involved in Laos, particularly where we might find ourselves fighting millions of Chinese troops in the jungle. In any event, I don't see how we can make any move in Laos which is five thousand miles away if we don't make a move in Cuba, which is only ninety miles away." [Richard M. Nixon, "Cuba, Castro and John F. Kennedy," *Reader's Digest*, Nov 64, pp 290–92.]

71. General Boyle later recalled an amusing story regarding the switch from PEO to MAAG. He had received the alert order for the change forty-eight hours before from Admiral Felt, but all of Boyle's men wore civilian clothes; none had uniforms. Boyle sent a "frantic telegram to CINCPAC saying, 'If you want us to be in uniform, get some here.' In a matter of hours the uniforms and insignia—all U.S. Army—were airlifted to Vientiane. So when reveille came, everyone turned out, whether they were Navy or Air Force . . . in Army uniforms. But it was very interesting how quickly the Marines, Navy, and Air Force got their people in the proper uniforms. It didn't take them very long." [Intvw, Lt Col Frank G. Walton, USA, Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., with Lt Gen Andrew J. Boyle, USA, Feb 13, 1971.]

72. Schlesinger, p 134; msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1118, Apr 16, 1960, JCS to CINCPAC, 994593, Apr 21, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 88–89.

73. Ltr, Roswell L. Gilpatric, DEPSECDEF, to Dean Rusk, SECSTATE, Apr 10, 1961; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1884, Apr 17, 1961; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 88–89; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.

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would stand alert but not be allowed to take off unless the enemy threatened Vientiane or other major objectives. Washington gave the green light to this request that same day but reserved the right to grant final approval for the bomb-laden planes to take off. This same message gave Felt permission to use carrier-based recce aircraft in Laos on a case-by-case basis.[74]

Aerial reconnaissance over Laos had slowed to a crawl. In February, Sarit ended the RT–33 flights after just six successful missions. Now, with the SC–47 gone, only Colonel Toland's VC–47 remained. Slow and cumbersome, this plane could not survive the antiaircraft fire nor could it fill the MAAG's growing photo requirements. High performance USAF reconnaissance aircraft, such as the RF–101, were needed. President Kennedy ruled them out because of international complications and a desire to keep the American presence in Laos as inconspicuous as possible. With the suggestion that aircraft known to be in the RLAF or RTAF inventory be used, Admiral Felt was restricted to RB–26s, RT–28s, or RT–33s. Felt chose to borrow an RT–33 from the Philippine Air Force and scrub it of its national markings. With Defense and State approval, he manned the plane with experienced USAF reconnaissance pilots from the 15th and 45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadrons.[75]

These seasoned pilots faced the same aerial recce problems over Laos that would later plague crews of more sophisticated aircraft. They had to identify small obscure targets in a densely forested country virtually devoid of roads, railroads, canals, or other cultural features. In early 1961, there were no navigational aids such as up-to-date maps, radio beacons, or tacan stations. The pilots were forced to learn the topography of the country by trial and error, establishing their own checkpoints and developing a feel for direction and distance. In addition, the RT–33 was limited in range, speed, altitude, and the number of cameras it could carry.[76]

The film was developed and processed at Clark Air Base, Philippines. After preliminary intelligence reports were prepared, the film was shipped to Yokota Air Base for detailed examination by the 67th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron. Known as Field Goal, these Udorn-based sorties began on April 24. While these photos excelled those taken by the modified C–47s, Field Goal could never keep abreast of the burgeoning reconnaissance needs of the MAAG or FAL.[77]

By April 26, Muong Sai had fallen; and Phoumi urgently appealed for air strikes. By now, even Brown was convinced that unless the B–26s were used, and probably SEATO ground forces as well, the enemy could not be stopped. He asked for authority to fly the bombers, provided the enemy moved south of the Lik River or, in the case of Luang Prabang, Paksane, or Savannakhet, occupied the high ground overlooking the towns. Brown was aware that such an action would scuttle the cease-fire negotiations and probably lead to the intervention of U.S. or SEATO forces. Nevertheless, he saw no alternative if the enemy pressed beyond the limits he had indicated.[78]

In Honolulu, Admiral Felt was monitoring these cables with growing alarm. While not ready to quarrel with the authorization placing control of the B–26s in Brown's hands, Felt was visibly upset over the ambassador's ruling out their use except for attacking enemy forces threatening a FAL-held objective, particularly since the March 13 meeting in Washington set the communist logistic system as first priority for the B–26s. Support for troops in contact was

74. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1921, Apr 23, 1961, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1153, Apr 23, 1961.
75. Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961–1966*, p 1; hists, 18th TFW, Jan–Jun 61, p 124, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 88–89; msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1774, Mar 31, 1961, SECSTATE to AmEmb Bangkok, 1562, Apr 8, 1961.
76. Greenhalgh, p 1–24
77. Hist, 5th AF, Jan-Jun 61, I, 124.
78. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1943, Apr 26, 1961.

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secondary. This arrangement had been reaffirmed at a March 27 meeting between the Joint Chiefs and high officials of the Defense Department. Now, Brown not only reversed these priorities but eliminated the B–26's primary mission. Felt deemed it impossible to accept restrictions stemming from Brown's interpretation of Washington's guidelines. CINCPAC requested that his views be forwarded to Secretary McNamara and that Ambassador Brown be directed not to interfere once "military action is joined and is being conducted in accordance with agreed objectives."[79]

(S) In view of the fall of Muong Sai and the Brown/Felt messages, President Kennedy called in his top advisors. Under Secretary of State Chester Bowles attended in place of Rusk, who was in Ankara, Turkey, taking part in a meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Bowles believed the introduction of a large U.S. force into Laos could spark a Chinese reaction. If such a step was necessary, the administration must be sure it had the solid backing of its European allies and India. Defense Secretary McNamara and Arleigh A. Burke, Chief of Naval Operations, expressed considerable concern over the exposed position of U.S. or SEATO forces in Vientiane should the Chinese make an air strike. On top of these gloomy assessments, Kennedy suspected there was scant domestic or international support for an insertion of U.S. forces into Laos. The conferees nevertheless agreed they would have to be prepared to make a major commitment of forces to Thailand and South Vietnam if the Kong Le/Pathet Lao advance continued southward. In the end, Kennedy instructed Admiral Felt to move a naval force closer to the area and to alert those units earmarked for air movement into Laos under SEATO Plan 5. However, he withheld permission for Brown to employ the B–26s.[80]

(S) Kennedy met with congressional leaders the next day and briefed them on recent developments, including Brown's cable regarding the B–26s and the probable need for SEATO intervention. Admiral Burke then gave a rundown on the current situation and repeatedly voiced the view that, unless the U.S. was ready to intervene militarily, all Southeast Asia would be lost. Yet, Burke warned that an American troop commitment might trigger a Korean-type intervention by communist China resulting in a long, tough war. After these sobering words, the congressmen were strong and unanimous in their reply—under no circumstances should the United States introduce its forces into Laos. They felt, with the Laotians unwilling to fight for themselves, there was no justification for American intervention. Significant support was shown, however, for putting U.S. forces into Thailand and South Vietnam.[81]

(S) With the B–26s now held back, Phoumi pleaded for bombs for his T–6s. On April 29, Kennedy authorized their release, but with a stipulation: the LAAF could use the ordnance until an effective cease-fire was reached. The cease-fire the President alluded to had been proposed a week earlier by Great Britain and the Soviet Union. It called for an international conference on Laos to include the three Laotian factions, the 1954 Geneva signatories, the three ICC countries, and Burma and Thailand (which border Laos on the west). The conference would start on May 12. It was hoped that the fighting would stop and, in the interim, a cease-fire observed. This announcement won the instant support of Hanoi, Peking, and the Royal Laotian Government; but for several days, no reaction came from Kong Le and the Pathet Lao. Except for around the Lik River, the skirmishing went on as each side maneuvered for better positions.[82]

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79. (S) Msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, 070017Z Apr 61; 272037Z Apr 61; MR, William P. Bundy, Dep ASD/ISA, subj: JCS-SECDEF Meeting on March 27 to Discuss Laos and Vietnam, Mar 27, 1961.

80. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Ankara (Eyes Only for Secretary fr Bowles), SEC 6, Apr 26, 1961. Although an Eyes Only message, it was microfilmed by the Kennedy Library in April 1964. Essentially the same information was sent to Vientiane as SECSTATE 1172, April 26, 1961. In fact, the messages were sent roughly two hours apart.

81. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Ankara (Eyes Only Secretary fr Bowles), SEC 23, Apr 27, 1961 [message microfilmed by Kennedy Library, April 1964].

82. (S) Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 1192, Apr 29, 1961; Dommen, pp 197–98.

[redacted]

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[redacted]

(U) General Boyle was preparing to begin using bombs on the T–6s when he was suddenly reined in by Ambassador Brown.[83] With Averell W. Harriman (then in Vientiane), Brown sent an urgent cable to Rusk claiming that bomb-laden T–6s would be "wholly ineffective" and a half measure. He termed their use a needless provocation that the communists might seize as an excuse to prolong the fighting, thus delaying the long sought cease-fire. Furthermore, doubts would again be raised in the minds of the neutrals and America's allies about U.S. sincerity in seeking a cease-fire. Rusk agreed and delegated to Brown the final authority on use of the heavier ordnance.[84]

(U) After receiving Rusk's cable, Brown drove to the Wattay flight line and ordered a dismayed Capt. Ronald G. Shaw, the USAF maintenance officer assigned to the LAAF, to unload the weapons. Shaw, in turn, had considerable difficulty getting the Filipino and Laotian ordnance specialists to carry out the order. When Maj. Thao Ma, the head of the LAAF, learned of Brown's action, he was furious and was determined to fly the mission anyway. He was finally talked out of this rash act by Shaw, and the bombs were then removed. Nonetheless, from this time on, Thao Ma deeply resented Ambassador Brown and was bitter over what he believed was American indecision.[85]

(U) The war took a surprising twist at this point, when Kong Le and the Pathet Lao failed to advance toward Vientiane. MAAG personnel expected such an attack because the FAL was demoralized and appeared on the verge of being routed. Reasons later put forth for Kong Le's decision were his need to consolidate recent gains and his willingness to now accept the Anglo-Soviet cease-fire proposal of April 24. To a certain extent, these points are probably true; but more than likely, the decision not to press forward was based on military factors, particularly geography and air power. Vang Vieng was in the mountains, while the road south (Route 13) zigzagged through a mountain valley and then into open country. The troops heading southward would be denied cover from the jungle and exposed to air attack. (Even Rusk admitted air strikes could be effective in such a situation.) To reach Vientiane, the enemy would have to cross the Lik River, soon to be swift and swollen by the monsoons. Facing them on the south bank's high ground were Col. Siho Lamphouthacoul's paratroopers. They were the best troops Phoumi had, and they were entrenched behind revetments and could be supported by artillery and air power. This air support was not just a handful of T–6s, but it was fourteen B–26s carrying bombs (possibly napalm) and flown by American crews.

(U) There was also the problem of resupply. Kong Le and the Pathet Lao were over a hundred miles from their base on the Plain of Jars. Transporting supplies over Routes 7 and 13 would have risked attack from the B–26s and ambushes from Meo tribesmen, and the monsoon soon turned the roads and footpaths into quagmires. While the Soviet airlift could have resupplied the insurgents, the Il–14 transports would have been in easy interceptor range of the T–6s or F–100s staging from Udorn, Thailand. Complicating the resupply picture was the absence of any antiaircraft defense, a defense that had deterred the T–6s from attacking targets on the Plain of Jars. The odds, therefore, were in the government's favor. Kong Le and his Pathet Lao/NVA allies apparently realized this. They did not attack, and the areas south of Vang Vieng rapidly stabilized. Perhaps more important, a major East-West confrontation was avoided when the Soviet transports did not appear.

(U) By May 3, both sides agreed to the cease-fire, although the Pathet Lao captured Muong Phalane in southern Laos on the morning of that day. (This action enabled them to later seize the vital town of Tchepone, subsequently a major supply and staging area for the Ho Chi Minh

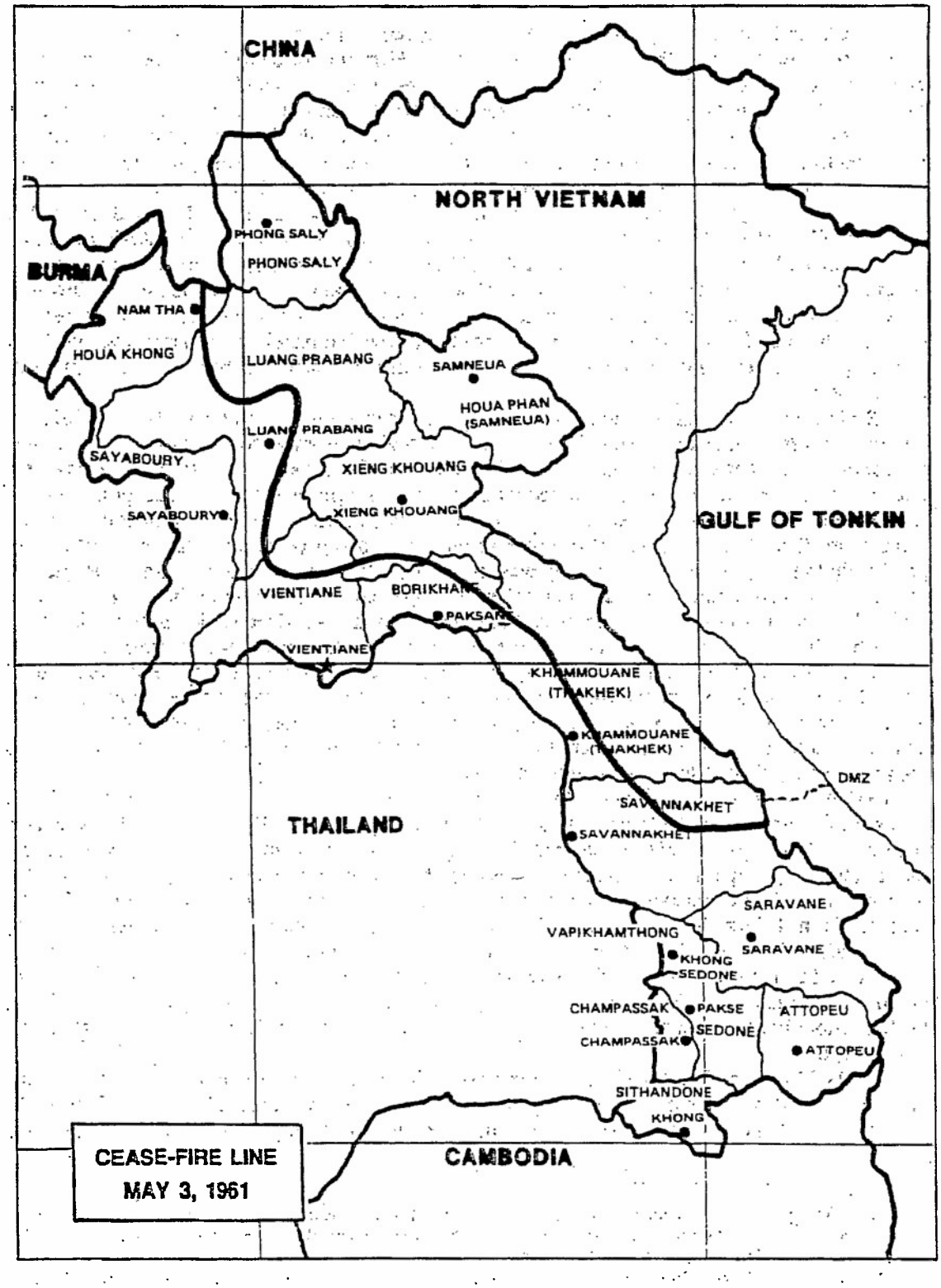
83. (U) In reporting these ambassadorial flip-flops to Felt, Boyle depicted himself as "again . . . caught in the middle" since he had alerted the FAL to imminent bomb release before Brown issued his holding order. [Msg, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, DA IN 109099, Apr 30, 1961.]

84. (U) Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 88–89; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1192, Apr 29, 1961.

85. (U) Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975.

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Trail.) By that afternoon, however, the fighting had generally stopped.[86] A few days later, the International Control Commission arrived on the Plain of Jars. All aerial reconnaissance was halted and Washington soon withdrew its ordnance authorization. Neither the T–6s nor B–26s ever got off the ground as bombers.[87]

Like many earlier and later cease-fires in Laos, the May 3 agreement was continually violated. One of the more flagrant Pathet Lao violations occurred at Ban Padong, a Meo-controlled mountain redoubt situated just a few miles south of the Plain of Jars. Since February, the communists had been increasing the pressure on the Meo garrison. They secured the mountain ridges in late April; and on May 15, Vang Pao estimated that over one hundred artillery shells fell on the mountaintop. On May 26 and 27, nearly four hundred incoming rounds were counted. The ICC tried to visit Ban Padong and the other Meo enclaves, but they were blocked by the Pathet Lao, since these were "liberated areas" where "patriotic forces" were merely "mopping up bandits."[88]

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

Phoumi had put in 225 troops as reinforcements; and the LAAF flew several T–6 sorties (no bombs) in a counterbattery role, but most were ineffective. Since [redacted] sponsored the Meo, the burden for defense and resupply fell to [redacted] A daily helicopter shuttle was started, but General Boyle believed the area indefensible. Fighting from static defensive positions ran against the Meo grain, Boyle argued, and the helicopters depended too much on open landing zones. If the enemy captured the landing areas, paradrops would be used; but Boyle reckoned it would only be a short time before antiaircraft guns stopped the airlift entirely. In fact, on May 30, an Air America H–34 crashed while trying to maneuver in the mist surrounding Ban Padong. This was followed by the downing of a transport soon thereafter.[89]

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The Meo made a conventional defense of Ban Padong because of the prestige that both Vang Pao and the RLG attached to holding the site and because of the need to defend the large Meo refugee camp nearby.[90] While the Meo stubbornly held on, a curious reversal of roles ensued between CINCPAC and Ambassador Brown. Previously, Admiral Felt had shown slight concern over the repercussions any anticommunist military action might bring. However, he questioned whether T–6 operations at Ban Padong were legitimate defensive actions as authorized by the terms of the cease-fire. Although aware of the adverse propaganda effect using T–6s could have, Brown believed something had to be done to counter enemy artillery and to sustain Meo morale; and he had authorized their use, but still refused to release any heavy ordnance. On May 30, the JCS formally approved the employment of T–6s in the Ban Padong area for as long as the Pathet Lao violated the cease-fire. Clearance would be required, however, for use of the fighters elsewhere or the loading of bombs.[91]

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86. Dommen, p 198.

87. In mid-July, CINCPAC was notified that the RTAF planned to move an F–84G unit from Don Muang to Takhli the next month to provide space for F–86Fs due in September. The parking at Takhli was insufficient to accommodate both B–26s and F–84s. Since the tense situation on the Plain of Jars no longer existed, Felt recommended the B–26s be phased out. This recommendation was quickly approved by the JCS and McNamara. [JCSM–481–61, no subj, Jul 24, 1961.]

88. Dommen, p 207.

89. Msg, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, DA IN 116915, May 27, 1961.

90. JCS SITREP 142–61, Jun 8, 1961.

91. Msgs, CINCPAC to CHMAAG Laos, 280546Z May 61, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2158, May 27, 1961, JCS to CINCPAC, 996, May 30, 1961. Apparently, Washington was confused over the ground rules governing T–6 operations. General Boyle noted that he had "little or no control" over T–6 missions flown by the LAAF. Nonetheless, on numerous occasions he pointed out to Phoumi that strikes not in reply to Pathet Lao attacks were of tremendous propaganda value to the enemy. Washington did not accept Boyle's explanation. He was told to reaffirm to Phoumi that T–6 strikes were to be flown solely against enemy forces violating the cease-fire. Boyle acknowledged these instructions but advised, "Phoumi takes orders from no one on employment of the FAL. He makes his own decisions on the employment of the T–6s without reference to this headquarters." Phoumi assured Boyle, however, that

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On June 6, the Meo position became untenable and Ban Padong was evacuated. Several hundred refugees (mostly women and children) streamed into Vientiane, where they caused a minor problem. Eventually, Vang Pao and many of the tribesmen, aided by the Special Forces [redacted] set up a new headquarters at Long Tieng and Sam Thong.[92] Many Meo enclaves, some deep in the mountains of Samneua and Xieng Khouang Provinces, remained a constant irritant to the Pathet Lao.

The Royal Laotian Government had no advanced training program for its air force, relying solely on agreements with other countries. Under the Military Assistance Program, the U.S. Air Force agreed to accept a few English-speaking pilots for flight training in the United States during the last half of 1960. None with a satisfactory knowledge of English could be found, so the slots stayed unfilled; most pilot and mechanic training was conducted by the French at bases in Europe and North Africa. At the time of Kong Le's coup, seventy-one personnel were undergoing such instruction. However, as Phoumi's dislike for the French hardened, the program was suspended and the Laotians called home. During this turmoil, the LAAF continued L–19 training at Savannakhet; but in February 1961, when the Thai agreed to resume T–6 training, this in-country program was dropped.[93]

The RTG decision to continue LAAF training was ratified on March 3 in Bangkok between representatives of the PEO, Royal Thailand Army (RTA), RTAF, LAAF, and JUSMAGTHAI. The Thai agreed to a ten-week course of forty-five hours for fifteen candidates. L–19 training would be given by the Thai army, to be followed by a forty-hour course in the T–6 by the Thai air force. Those pilots still in the program would spend an additional ninety hours in advanced T–6 training. A second class of pilots would follow approximately fourteen weeks after the first group. Estimated cost of the program was three hundred thousand dollars.[94]

Ground personnel were also urgently needed to repair aircraft, engines, and auxiliary equipment. To fill this gap, the PEO had earlier selected on-the-job training—a method proven successful with MAAGs in technically unskilled, agrarian societies. Since manpower limitations and the Geneva accords restrictions hampered Americans, a contract was signed in March 1959 with the Eastern Construction Company of Manila to furnish eighty-two Filipino technicians for eighteen (later twelve) months in Laos. The Eastern Construction Company in Laos (ECCOIL) program inched along for two years due chiefly to language difficulties. This, in turn, dampened the motivation of the trainees.[95]

Although most of the Filipinos could speak English, few of the Laotians could. Unfortunately, all the manuals were in English, and the technical terms had no counterpart in the Lao tongue. One of the first things Captain Shaw did after arriving at Savannakhet in late 1960 was to begin translating tech orders into French. To help clear the English language hurdle, ECCOIL (and occasionally United States Information Service) personnel conducted language training with the technical instruction. (Capt. William G. Von Platen, assistant air attaché, noted that listening to a Filipino trying to teach English to a Laotian was less than inspiring.) A language trainer complete with earphones, tape recorders, and booths arrived in October 1960, but it remained in crates for nearly six months while LAAF chief Thao Ma tried to make up his mind whether he wanted it at Vientiane or Savannakhet. It is no wonder the Laotians appeared

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the T–6s were being used solely for defensive purposes and the MAAG chief had confirmed this by having his men check the postmission reports. [Msgs, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 020506Z Jun 61; AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2186, Jun 2, 1961; CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, DA IN 119700, Jun 7, 1961; JCS to CINCPAC, 1243, Aug 24, 1961; and CHMAAG Laos to JCS, DA IN 144330, Aug 27, 1961.]

92. [redacted] *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p D–34.
93. [redacted] Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Semiannual FWAIS Capabilities—Laos, Mar 22, 1961.
94. [redacted] Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 105.
95. [redacted] See note 93.

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disinterested or showed a marked dislike for the on-the-job training program; however, Von Platen believed that part of this indifference was due to racial conflict between the Laotians and the Filipinos, the Laotians considering themselves superior to the Filipinos. The high absentee rate caused Von Platen to lament by the end of 1960, "On-the-job training thus far has not uncovered any personnel with the initiative, aptitude, or interest to complete U.S. type formal technical training."[96]

The failure of ground personnel to respond to on-the-job training had severe repercussions for the LAAF C–47 fleet after Kong Le's August 9 coup. From then until mid-October, the transports were in the air[97] without any ground maintenance and they deteriorated markedly. When the rump Programs Evaluation Office moved to Savannakhet, fourteen ECCOIL mechanics went along to keep the planes flying. A crude facility, Savannakhet airfield had no hangars or parking spaces for aircraft, and a few scattered pieces of steel planking served as hardstands. The repairs, chiefly of the "bailing wire" variety, were all done in the open. During the dry season, clouds of red dust swirled around the field. It was, as Shaw later remembered, "A hell of a mess!"[98] Some relief came in late October 1960 when Thai Airways in Bangkok agreed to provide periodic inspection and IRAN (inspection and repair as necessary) on the C–47s. Without the Filipino mechanics at Savannakhet, the FAL would have lost its transport capability during the 1960–61 dry season.[99]

The attitudes of its commanders, Colonel Sourith and Major Thao Ma, also affected LAAF performance. Sourith, who had headed the air arm since late 1957, had been appointed to this post because of his reputation as a disciplinarian. He later attended flying schools in France but was checked out only in liaison aircraft. Sourith did little flying and expressed no desire to upgrade into C–47s. He shunned PEO advice and at times was difficult to work with. After the Kong Le coup, Sourith became a staunch supporter of Phoumi; and after reoccupying Vientiane, Phoumi rewarded Sourith's loyalty by making him Military Region III Commander. To fill the post of Chief of the LAAF, Phoumi promoted Thao Ma, a young (thirty-two years old), but highly qualified (two thousand hours), C–47 pilot.[100]

Thao Ma was a former paratroop commander who had jumped into Dien Bien Phu during that epic battle. When the garrison was about to surrender, the French told him to do what he could to save his command. He then took his company and escaped to friendly lines. After the Indochina War, he remained a parachutist and became friends with Kong Le (as did Vang Pao). In 1957, Thao Ma was sent to France for pilot training, returning two years later. After assuming command of the LAAF, he was described as "extremely interested in his work, diligent, forceful, but sometimes tactless." Like many Laotian officers, he seemed subject to deep depression when things did not go right and great elation when they did. He was deemed highly nervous (smoking

96. See note 93; rprts, AIRA Saigon, Semiannual Updating FWAIS S–3632, Aug 1, 1961, Semiannual FWAIS Air Capabilities—Laos, Mar 22, 1961; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975; intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Harry S. Coleman, USAF, Ret, Nov 19, 1974. During January-July 1961, Coleman served as Chief, Air Force Section, PEO/MAAG Laos.

97. Whether operated by Phoumi or Kong Le, there were few flight logs maintained by the C–47 crews during the last four months of 1960. An accurate record of transport flying hours is therefore not available, but from their observations, U.S. personnel knew that a considerable number of troops and much cargo had been shuttled throughout the country. Another inference was the lack of time on the L–20s, because the pilots flew the C–47 as first priority. [Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Mar 22, 1961.]

98. To which George Concepcion, an ECCOIL line chief, replied, "Don't worry, Mr. Shaw. In about two or three months you'll get accumulated!" [Intvw, author with Col Ronald G. Shaw, Kelly AFB, Tex, Jan 22, 1975.]

99. Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Mar 22, 1961; ltr, CINCPAC to JCS, subj: Lessons Learned, MAAG and Special Forces Activities in Laos, Feb 21, 1963; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975.

100. Pratt, pp 8–9; DAF IR–1504023, AIRA Saigon, Who's Who Report, Ma, Thao, Aug 15, 1962. This intelligence report was written by Capt Ronald G. Shaw and forwarded to the office of Lt Col Butler B. Toland, Jr., in Saigon.

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about five packs of cigarettes a day) and excitable under pressure. He always impressed Americans, if for no other reason than that he often flew without shoes. Despite this idiosyncrasy, the few American air officers who met him were convinced that only he had the ability to command the LAAF.[101]

Intensely loyal to Phoumi, Thao Ma refused to take orders except from him and often bragged to outsiders of this close relationship. At least once a week he met the general, an act noticed and resented by other high ranking army officers. Because of his rapport with Phoumi, Thao Ma refused to go through channels when requesting funds, equipment and improvements for the air arm. In time, this alienated his former chief and immediate superior, Colonel Sourith.[102]

In many ways, Thao Ma was the mirror image of Phoumi. Both men had attended French military schools even though they disliked the French intensely and were quite blunt in stating that dislike.[103] Neither was willing to delegate authority, citing incompetence among subordinates. Both begrudgingly sent men to the PEO-sponsored training schools and often mistrusted or ignored the advice of the Americans. At this stage, however, Thao Ma was not inclined to become embroiled in domestic politics. Phoumi's protege preferred rather to concentrate on managing and flying the C–47s based at Savannakhet. He did a creditable job in handling the C–47 fleet during the first half of 1961. Only four of the nine aircraft assigned were available owing to maintenance problems. Over this period, the average monthly flying rate was 270 hours per aircraft. The one complaint of the air attaché was that too often the C–47s were used in a "passenger convenience role."[104]

As Thao Ma devoted most of his time to the LAAF transports, the flamboyant and charismatic Capt. Keo Soutsana headed the T–6 section. This promising young officer was killed in March 1961, forcing Thao Ma to take an interest in the attack branch. The LAAF chief was subsequently checked out in the T–6 but rarely flew it. He claimed he was too valuable to be killed in action, since there was no one qualified to replace him. Though Thao Ma was no doubt correct in assessing his subordinates, his reluctance to fly in combat did not escape the eyes of some western observers. In fairness to Thao Ma (and the other pilots), the T–6 was not suitable for combat. It was old and slow and, without armor plating, was susceptible to ground fire. Furthermore, Ambassador Brown's refusal to allow the aircraft to be armed with bombs undoubtedly lowered the morale of the T–6 crews. In light of these factors, it was evident the pilots intended avoiding combat in the T–6s, hoping to stay alive until the T–28s arrived. This explains the high flying hours versus results. The T–6 pilots for example, flew 210 hours in March when Kong Le counterattacked at Sala Phou Khoun and 113 hours in support of the Meo at Ban Padong in June. Still, the results were nil because they repeatedly refused to fly in any area where ground fire could be expected. At debriefings they frankly admitted attacking whatever moved rather than a bona fide target. It is no wonder that on several occasions they strafed government troops. At other times, they salvoed their rockets into the jungle. Their favorite expression soon became "Nous avons tue la nature"—we killed nature (meaning trees).[105]

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101. *Ibid.*; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975.
102. DAF IR–1504023, AIRA Saigon, Aug 15, 1962; MAAG Laos Final Rprt; Coleman intvw, Nov 19, 1974.
103. Phoumi wanted to forcibly evict the French from Seno Air Base but was restrained from this rash act by Brown and Boyle. Thao Ma did buzz the home of Seno's French commander from time to time to see what kind of reaction he would get. Once he ordered a French officer to leave LAAF headquarters because "you have no more business with us." [Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Who's Who Report, Ma, Thao [sic] DAF IR1504023, Aug 15, 1962.]
104. DAF IR–1504023, AIRA Saigon, Aug 15, 1962; MAAG Laos Final Rprt; Coleman intvw, Nov 19, 1974.
105. Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Aug 1, 1961; MAAG Laos Final Rprt; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975. Thao Ma was more subtle. He always reported he had successfully carried out an *exercice de combat*—combat exercise. [Intvw, author with Lt Col Ernest P. Uiberall, USA, Ret, Mar 13, 1974.] Others claimed, *Nous avons menace l'ennemi*—we

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(S) Air Force personnel of the PEO/MAAG had their work cut out. Unfortunately, a few of these individuals were without the background, temperament, and ability so vital to working with backward or unskilled people. They neither spoke nor tried to learn French, lacked tact, and groused constantly of primitive facilities, the humidity, and unsanitary conditions. Many holed up in the barbed wire-enclosed embassy compound counting the days to reassignment. None of this should have been surprising. Apparently, some high-ranking Air Force officers looked upon Laos as a "dumping ground" and exiled to Vientiane their misfits, malcontents, and alcoholics, whose poor behavior did not pass unnoticed. Since these men made the crucial mistake of treating the Laotians as the French had done, the LAAF commandos often refused to cooperate or work with Americans. Never was the need more starkly apparent for qualified and dedicated men to set an example of positive leadership.[106]

(S) Yet, by mid-1961, the LAAF began to show slight improvement, even though this might not have been discernible to outsiders. This was due in great part to the arrival, during the year, of several USAF officers and enlisted men who, on their own, made a determined effort to train and work with the LAAF. Many of them spoke French and those who did not gained the confidence of the Laotians through their leadership qualities. Col. Harry S. Coleman is a case in point. Admiral Felt and General O'Donnell sent him to set up a tactical operations center when it appeared JTF 116 and other units might be deploying to Vientiane, but he wound up "cleaning house" in the Air Force MAAG section on the orders of General Boyle. The unsuitable individuals that had been sent to Laos were shipped home, and Boyle appointed Coleman commander of the air section. Although he could not speak a word of French, Coleman set about at once to gain the confidence of the airmen and Thao Ma. The process was painfully slow; it took weeks, even months, before an effective rapport and working relationship could be built. Gradually the Laotian attitude toward their American advisors changed. The dive angles of the T–6s became slightly steeper, and the enlisted personnel became more receptive to on-the-job training by demonstrating a willingness to learn and accept advice.[107] Even Thao Ma was convinced of the need to stop flying with his feet bare.[108]

(S) Coleman did not stop here. He persuaded Thao Ma to resume O–1 instruction at Savannakhet and cross-train a few C–47 pilots in the T–6. Other transport pilots were put through a makeshift instrument school at Wattay. While the graduates were not good instrument pilots by USAF standards, Coleman had the foresight to reward them with a formal graduation ceremony, a rousing speech (that Shaw toned down in the translation), and the all-important instrument card. He also helped Shaw build a much-needed machine shop for the LAAF. Since no funds were available for the project, Coleman resorted to the age-old "midnight requisition." However, he failed to elicit the help of the French Military Mission, later terming them as "cooperative as a cobra in a corner." Perhaps because he spoke fluent French, Shaw had better luck. He succeeded in securing the aid of the Seno base commander for critically needed building materials for maintenance hangars and shops at Savannakhet.[109]

(S) In September 1961, a new team of advisors (thirteen officers and five airmen) was sent to the MAAG. This group built upon the foundation laid by Coleman, Shaw, and others. They brought Thao Ma around to the idea that, for the on-the-job training program to be successful,

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threatened the enemy. [Intvw, author with Col William H. Pietsch Jr., USA, Ret, July 25, 1974.]

106. (S) Rprt, AIRA Saigon, Aug 1, 1961; Coleman intvw, Nov 19, 1974; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975.

107. (S) Coleman intvw, Nov 19, 1974; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975; rprt, AIRA Vientiane, Updating of FWAIS S–3622, Nov 1, 1961; MAAG Laos Final Rprt.

108. (S) Thao Ma only met Coleman halfway; he steadfastly refused to wear socks with his shoes. [Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Harry S. Coleman, USAF, Ret, Galveston, Tex, Nov 15, 1974.]

109. (S) Coleman intvw, Nov 19, 1974; Shaw intvw, Jan 22, 1975.

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the students had to learn English. On November 15, 1961, the chief of the LAAF (now known as the RLAF or Royal Laotian Air Force) approved two hours per day for the forty-three students enrolled in on-the-job training or previously selected for stateside training. By January 1962, four pilots were deemed sufficiently proficient in English to be sent to the United States for T–28 training. Thao Ma now increased the classroom hours to six a day; by midyear, 120 students were enrolled, but the RLAF leader was always "too busy" to study English himself.[110]

[redacted] Fortunately, the cease-fire coincided with the monsoon season so there was little combat flying in the last half of 1961. During this period, a practice range of sorts was developed on a hillside near Pakse, but the absence of scoring devices prevented correction of errors and the effectiveness of the T–6s remained low. In December, the first group of twelve pilots trained by the Thai returned, giving the LAAF twenty-two qualified flyers. Nevertheless, after being briefed on the situation in December, General O'Donnell remained skeptical that the LAAF would be able to operate the MAP T–28s by their May-June 1962 delivery date.[111]

[redacted] Despite signs of some progress, the chronic shortage of FAL leaders to conduct successful military operations persisted. Morale, motivation, and a willingness to fight were direct functions of leadership; officers lacking these key ingredients could not give them to their men. At the end of 1961, no responsible American officer anticipated that these basic weaknesses could be corrected with anything short of a program lasting from three to five years. Moreover, what few improvements had been made by the government forces were offset by similar improvements in the enemy force during the year. General Boyle, near the end of 1961, estimated that enemy strength had grown to nearly thirty thousand troops (twenty thousand in organized units with three thousand to five thousand classified as guerrillas). In addition, there were fifty-four hundred North Vietnamese troops serving as cadres and an unspecified number as advisors and technicians. Owing chiefly to Viet Minh cadres and logistic support, the Pathet Lao were consolidating their hold on Phong Saly, Samneua, and Xieng Khouang Provinces. Their morale was high as they pressed probes, patrols, and hit-and-run raids with relative impunity. It was obvious they not only had retained their superiority over the FAL but also could mount offensive operations on all major fronts at times and places of their own choosing. Without outside help, the FAL could offer nothing more than a delaying action for two to three weeks.[112]

[redacted] By the end of 1961, the war in Laos had fallen into a distinct pattern that would prevail in varying degrees for the next decade. Unlike the conflict developing in South Vietnam, Laos was no longer basically a guerrilla insurgency. It was being fought conventionally by small infantry units supported by mortars, light artillery, and, to a certain extent, air power. Even armor had appeared, although it had yet to play a significant role in military operations. However, because of the economic and technological backwardness of Laos, both the government and the Pathet Lao now depended almost exclusively on outside assistance to sustain their positions. It is significant that this support came not only from the traditional antagonists of Laos—Thailand and Vietnam—but also from major powers located many thousands of miles away.

[redacted] The monsoon weather was also setting a pattern for future military operations. At first, it served as a period for recruiting, refitting, and resupplying depleted units. Then, as the war grew in intensity, the weather's greatest impact was on the logistic network feeding the Pathet Lao. During 1960–61, the antigovernment forces were supplied by air and motor transport. This let them take the offensive and capture sizable territory from the Laotian Army. While the FAL had the same logistic capability, it was without the leadership, hard discipline, and esprit needed

110. [redacted] *Ibid.*; rprt, AIRA Vientiane, Nov 1, 1961; MAAG Laos Final Rprt; Pratt, p 8; Futrell, p 145.
111. [redacted] DAF IR-1504023, AIRA Saigon, Aug 15, 1962; MAAG Laos Final Rprt.
112. [redacted] DJSM-1259-61, Oct 13, 1961; msg, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, DA IN 166366, Oct 27, 1961; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 247, Aug 14, 1961.

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to counter Kong Le's dedicated paratroopers and the Pathet Lao with their Vietnamese cadre. Hence, government forces withdrew, trading space for time as they awaited the rainy season. When the rains turned the roads muddy and unusable, supplies were hard to get in, except by air. Phoumi held the advantage in this area, for between the LAAF and Air America, he had the necessary airlift. On the other hand, the Pathet Lao and Kong Le would lose the Soviet transports in 1962. As time passed, their lines of communication had to be shortened. They withdrew, and the government troops reoccupied the territory; but when the rains stopped and the roads dried, the enemy once more seized the offensive. With one major exception, this constant ebb and flow, this trading of real estate coincident with the southwest monsoon, symbolized the war in northern Laos.

(U) Air power was still in its infancy in Laos during 1961. The fixed-wing and helicopter airlift, however, proved highly efficient and a portent of future operations. Early on, the poor road network forced both sides to rely on airlift. Moreover, the monsoon weather and mountainous, jungle-covered terrain placed motor transportation at a decided disadvantage. Until the roads were improved, the protagonists had to rely on some form of aerial mobility and resupply. During 1960–61, the Soviets and Americans sustained their clients in this manner, both being especially adept at airdrops. Kong Le's successful withdrawal up Route 13 after Phoumi's capture of Vientiane could not have taken place without aerial resupply. The timely establishment of an airhead at Vang Vieng, and afterwards on the Plain of Jars, was vital to the paratrooper captain's subsequent defense east of Sala Phou Khoun. Similarly, Phoumi pulled off a successful paratroop drop on the Plain of Jars, but his inability to resupply these men, because Ambassador Brown withheld Air America aircraft, lowered their morale and proved their undoing. The use of helicopters near Muong Kassy likewise showed how a quick, vertical insertion of troops could affect military operations. The later poor performance of this force ultimately detracted from the importance of the helicopter landings. Nonetheless, the value of airlift as a substitute for motor transportation in Laos had been demonstrated.

(U) In contrast, tactical aviation had been nearly worthless to the FAL. Obviously, it would have to improve immeasurably before it could be of real assistance. This improvement would come with proper training and equipment but would take considerable time, effort, and money because of the many, almost insurmountable, obstacles.

(U) The most striking pattern by far that emerged in 1961 was the U.S. ambassador's control of military activities. This control did not come without a struggle because the military leadership (personified by Admiral Felt and the Joint Chiefs) were loathe to accept a situation where the local State Department representative had the final say in such matters. Yet, this is precisely what CINCPAC and the JCS were confronted with as early as 1960. Since Felt and the service chiefs had gained their battle and command experience in World War II—when the military had a fairly free hand—ambassadorial control was not easily swallowed. True, there had been restraints on military operations during the Korean War, but these were in the form of specific directives from Washington. In Laos, the U.S. ambassador, acting like a Roman proconsul, decided when and where (if at all) to use heavy ordnance and had prevented legitimate enemy targets from being struck. He had even reversed tactical air priorities, stressing close support of ground forces over interdiction of supply lines. Several times he withheld vital Air America airlift from Phoumi. It is no wonder an exasperated Admiral Felt, even though overruled, filed vigorous protests over what he considered interference in a military sphere by a man of no military expertise.

(U) When the dust finally settled, Ambassador Brown's position had been strengthened, not reduced as the services had hoped. Following the May cease-fire, President Kennedy placed all ambassadors in charge of the entire U.S. mission where they served, including representatives of all U.S. agencies. The single exception was U.S. military forces operating in the field under the control of a U.S. military commander. Such an organization was in Thailand, the Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand, which later became the Military Assistance Command,

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Thailand (MACTHAI); and another would emerge in South Vietnam as the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). In Laos there was no such command, nor would there be one. Control of military activities, accordingly, was placed squarely in the hands of the U.S. ambassador. Kennedy emphasized that the ambassador was outside the military chain of command, but he recognized that actions of U.S. military forces might adversely affect relations with the host country. In such cases, the ambassador could consult with the proper military commander. If a stalemate resulted, either side could request adjudication by a higher authority. Under such guidelines, there would be many appeals to Washington during the next decade.

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Chapter III

The Decline of Phoumi (U)

(U) On May 11, 1961, the newly revived International Control Commission for Laos reported a general observance of the cease-fire. Five days later, the fourteen-nation Geneva conference opened what was to be a series of endless sessions. Early the next month, President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev met in Vienna. They discussed Berlin, nuclear armaments, and "wars of national liberation;" but reached no agreement. However, the two leaders did issue a joint communique on Laos endorsing a neutral and independent kingdom under a government chosen by its people. President Kennedy now hoped that Ambassador Averell W. Harriman could handle the day-to-day policy questions on Laos.[1]

(U) The three princes (Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong, and Boun Oum) met in Zurich on June 19 under the aegis of Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk. On June 22 they agreed in principle to a tripartite government that would rule Laos until new general elections could be held. Endless delays ensued, and it was not until October 6 that a second meeting took place on a rickety bridge spanning the Lik River. At its conclusion, it was announced that a cabinet would be formed and that it would be composed of a neutral center of eight members and two four-member groups representing the left and right. On October 18, the king invited Souvanna to head the new government but stipulated that Boun Oum would stay in office until the cabinet was formed. With characteristic optimism, Souvanna believed one more meeting between the princes would settle all remaining differences. Yet Boun Oum, for whom the agreement was prelude to resignation, found it easy to disagree with Souvanna's suggestion that the next meeting be held on the Pathet Lao controlled Plain of Jars. He and Phoumi insisted on Vientiane, giving the embassy the impression the rightists were determined to prevent a reconciliation and perhaps provoke a resumption of hostilities.[2]

(U) This impression was not unfounded. Prolonging the disagreement was a cornerstone of the Boun Oum/Phoumi strategy. Since the king had called on Souvanna to form a new government, Phoumi intended to agree to nothing until the prince submitted a plan outlining the government's composition and who would receive what portfolios. Details on integration and demobilization of the armed forces would also be required before he would meet with the other factions. Convinced that Souvanna could not solve these problems, Phoumi anticipated that negotiations would eventually reach an impasse. He intended to then push his plan for a government headed by the king.[3]

(U) Phoumi pursued a foot-dragging strategy because he was convinced that the United States would always support him when the chips were down. After the Zurich meeting, he visited Washington but apparently misinterpreted what was said to him by U.S. officials. At the State Department, he was told that a negotiated settlement was the only workable solution for Laos; but after visiting President Kennedy, he came away with the impression that the Americans

1. (U) Richard J. Walton, *Cold War and Counterrevolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1972), pp 25–27; Schlesinger, p 474. Harriman headed the American delegation to the Geneva conference. As his deputy, he selected a young foreign service officer, William H. Sullivan. Sullivan later served as Ambassador to Laos from November 1964–April 1969.
2. (U) Toye, p 175; hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 124.
3. (U) Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 123–24.

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"would make no more concessions to the communists." At this time, he also received tentative Pentagon backing for an increase in FAL strength to sixty thousand men.[4] More important, Phoumi returned to Vientiane convinced that if hostilities resumed, the United States would intervene to maintain his position. Thus encouraged, he made plans to reorganize the army and concentrate the bulk of it in southern Laos where six of his nine GMs were already located. Meantime, his negotiating position with the neutralists and Pathet Lao hardened into intransigence.[5]

The State Department was understandably disturbed over Phoumi's interpretation of his Washington conversations and his conviction that the United States would openly and quickly give him massive assistance if fighting resumed. State was worried that he might trigger an FAL offensive in the firm belief that a Viet Minh response would be countered by U.S. action. Considering Phoumi's uncompromising attitude, State's forebodings were all the more understandable.[6]

For his part, Phoumi was aware that not all agencies of the United States government sided with the State Department. Despite Phoumi's recognized shortcomings, the CIA and most of the American military, particularly Admiral Felt, continued to urge stronger support for him because he was a dedicated anticommunist. However, CINCPAC's antipathy toward Souvanna was well known in Washington. Indeed, on several occasions Admiral Felt became so outspoken that William P. Bundy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, recommended that he be "kept on tight rein" lest Felt give the impression that he, not Washington, was running the show. Felt made his feelings clear in early October after a Vientiane meeting with Boyle and Phoumi. He publicly announced that if a peaceful solution to the Laotian question could not be found, American and SEATO forces were ready to come to the aid of Laos.[7]

As the United States government patiently waited for Phoumi and Boun Oum to negotiate, the MAAG raced against time to whip the Royal Army—now known as the FAR (*Forces Armées du Royaume*)—into some sort of fighting shape. The other side was not idle, however, as intelligence efforts showed a buildup of supplies by both air and land means.

Intelligence of the ongoing enemy supply buildup came chiefly from renewed aerial reconnaissance. The RT–33 Field Goal surveillance had stopped on May 10 in deference to the cease-fire. In early June, however, the Joint Chiefs alerted Secretary McNamara to "serious deficiencies" in the Laotian intelligence picture. The chiefs admitted that, since Field Goal's suspension, they were literally operating in the dark. Information was urgently needed on Pathet Lao strength, locations, organization, and equipment in northcentral Laos and the Plain of Jars. Although the CIA and State Department were furnishing military planners with some intelligence of this sort, it was deemed insufficient.[8]

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4. On August 19, 1961, Phoumi formally asked General Boyle for an augmentation of the FAL to nearly 71,000. Boyle and Felt balked because of the acute condition of the FAL leadership and the training program. CINCPAC did consent to make a strong pitch to Washington for approval of the previously agreed on figure of 60,000 (46,200 FAL, 13,800 ADC). The JCS and Defense Secretary McNamara went along; but the State Department did not, noting that too often Phoumi had raised FAL force levels on his own and rarely consulted with U.S. personnel. Moreover, Phoumi's request came at a time when everyone was supposedly searching for a peaceful solution to Laotian problems. If Phoumi would abolish his unauthorized forces and show a willingness to follow U.S. policy guidelines, State would agree to review the matter of additional support next year. [Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 110–11.]

5. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, p 118; Stevenson, p 160;

6. Msgs, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 100345Z Jul 61, CINCPAC to CHMAAG Laos, 152335Z Jul 61, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 71, Jul 18, 1961.

7. Hist, CINCPAC, 1961, pt 2, pp 118–19; memo, William P. Bundy, Dep ASD/ISA, to Robert S. McNamara, SECDEF, subj: Rules of Engagement for Possible Laos Intervening Force, May 2, 1961, w/atch, ISA Proposed Amendments to Draft DOD Position Concerning Laos; Toland intvw, Nov 18, 1974; Toye, 185.

8. JCSM–373–61, Jun 2, 1961, derived from JCS 1992/996, May 23, 1961.

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(U) The decision to renew aerial reconnaissance was delayed during the rainy season; but on October 4, 1961, Field Goal flights resumed against several key communist-held areas along the north-south axis of Route 13, including the Vang Vieng airfield. During the remainder of October, twenty-six successful flights were flown. At Ambassador Brown's insistence, these aircraft operated above forty thousand feet, ostensibly to avoid detection. When several flights were fired on, it was obvious they had been discovered. In lieu of lifting the altitude restrictions, Brown ruled out all sorties over the Plain of Jars and Xieng Khouangville without his permission and temporarily suspended (November 6–10) all surveillance over the plain.[9]

(U) The altitude restrictions and the RT–33's camera limitations produced poor-quality film. To replace Field Goal and Pipestem (an RF–101 reconnaissance group operating out of South Vietnam), four RF–101s (nicknamed Able Mable) deployed to Don Muang, Thailand, from the 45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, Misawa, Japan, for thirty days, flying their first mission on November 8. The RT–33s assigned to Field Goal remained as courier aircraft to transport the developed film and prints.[10]

(U) The RF–101 Voodoo was the Air Force's primary tactical reconnaissance aircraft. It was a modified supersonic (but mediocre) fighter with a combat ceiling near forty-five thousand feet, a combat radius of nine hundred miles, and a top speed of eight hundred seventy-five knots. Normal camera configuration consisted of a nose oblique, left and right oblique, and a split vertical combination with two cameras of the same focal length offset slightly from the vertical to achieve wider coverage. The cameras, which took the large-format negatives needed by photo interpreters, could be operated singly, simultaneously, or in any combination. However, the RF–101 lacked the illumination devices, night cameras, and precise navigation systems for night photography.[11]

(U) A photographic processing cell (PPC) accompanied Able Mable. The PPC had a developing and printing laboratory, a target intelligence section for briefing and debriefing, and a photo interpreter section. Five copies of each negative were produced for distribution, and the film was then sent to Japan for detailed examination and mass production of prints (if needed). Photo intelligence reports were normally in the hands of theater commanders or national agencies twenty-four hours after completion of the mission. In December, two U.S. Army photo interpreters joined the PPC to help identify enemy ground equipment.[12]

(U) In late November, General Boyle secured for PACAF a waiver to the ambassador's forty thousand-foot rule. This let the RF–101s and carrier reconnaissance aircraft operate at altitudes compatible with photographic equipment and enemy defenses. By the end of 1961, Able Mable had flown 130 sorties, processed nearly fifty-four thousand feet of film, and made over twelve thousand prints. Roads and passes were photographed and many convoys pinpointed, clearly identifying the support the Pathet Lao were receiving from North Vietnam. The continuing Soviet airlift into southern Laos was documented by the RF–101s. One unusual photo taken at Tchepone revealed two Russian Il–14 Crates (similar to the C–47) in the landing pattern and three other aircraft on the ground unloading.[13]

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9. (U) Hist, PACAF, Jul–Dec 61, III; hist rprts, ACS/Intel, PACAF, Jul 61, Oct 61; memo, ACS/Ops, PACAF, subj: Altitude Restrictions on Reconnaissance Flights over Laos, in trip bk, Jan 5, 1962, of Col Richard A. Yudkin, ACS/Plans, PACAF.
10. (U) Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961–1966*, p 3.
11. (U) William H. Greenhalgh, Jr., "U.S. Air Force Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1960–1975," manuscript (Maxwell AFB, Ala., 1977). The first major modification of the RF–101 took place in 1962 when the aircraft was given a limited night capability with the installation of high-resolution cameras and flash cartridge pods. [Hist, TAC, Jan–Jun 62, pp 404–05.] Problems inherent in night photo reconnaissance are discussed in Victor B. Anthony, *Tactics and Techniques of Night Operations [The Air Force in Southeast Asia]* (Washington, 1973), pp 182–83.
12. (U) Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961–1966*, p 3; msg, 13th AF to PACAF, 040935Z Nov 61.
13. (U) Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961–1966*, pp 4–5; msg, PACAF to 13th AF, PFCVC–556,

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The War in Northern Laos

General Boyle estimated that, with the end of the rains, the Soviet transports had flown 195 tons of supplies per week into Laos; and convoys of North Vietnamese trucks were also seen rolling through Barthelemy Pass into the Plain of Jars. The MAAG chief believed an additional 2,200 tons had entered communist territory between November 15, 1961, and January 15, 1962. The North Vietnamese had also stepped up their Pathet Lao training and maintained their cadres in many of Souphanouvong's units. Colonel Law believed the FAR could cope with the Pathet Lao on relatively even terms but could not successfully engage an enemy reinforced by the NVA. Law described the FAR as having an almost pathological fear of the North Vietnamese. It was conceivable that, if the Pathet Lao (supported by regular North Vietnamese troops) overwhelmed the government's forces, the United States would openly intervene in the end as Phoumi hoped.[14]

The enemy's buildup of supplies had been substantial; and with the United States matching this buildup, there was every indication that, unless a tripartite government was formed, the fighting would resume. Such a government was being held up by Phoumi's stubborn refusal to agree to the proposal (backed by the United States) that the defense and interior ministries be filled by neutralists, rather than rightists. To bring Phoumi into line, Brown favored suspending all military aid, believing that unless this was done, "we'll be shown to be the paper tiger he [Phoumi] asserts and any hope we have of influencing [him] will be lost forever." Admiral Felt strongly resisted such drastic action on the grounds it would just encourage Kong Le and the Pathet Lao to resume the offensive. However, General Boyle held that suspending military supplies to Phoumi would not have much effect for thirty days. During that time, only motor fuel would be in short supply. The FAR had stockpiled ordnance and ammunition to last at least forty-five days. Even withholding financial support would have little impact the first month. After that, Boyle believed Phoumi would float a loan from the National Bank of Laos as he had done in the past or borrow from Boun Oum or Sarit Thanarat. Washington decided to compromise: the flow of military supplies continued, but the monthly payment to the RLG was withheld. Finally, on January 10, Boun Oum agreed to meet with the other two princes in Geneva. Two days later, U.S. aid resumed.[15]

Meantime, the Pathet Lao were reinforced with substantial NVA regular units and began concentrating opposite key points held by the Royal Army. To ascertain the precise locations of these forces, FAR units moved into areas not clearly held by either side at the time of the cease-fire. Phoumi's troops maneuvered in these "buffer zones" relatively unhindered until they pressured a position the enemy considered critical, when the communists attacked, driving the FAR from the threatened area. In no case did the enemy pursue or follow up his advantage.[16]

Phoumi had been carrying out such probing operations since late 1961 near enemy-held Muong Sai in Luang Prabang Province. None of these probes made any headway, chiefly due to the Soviet airlift of fresh reinforcements into the region. One of his columns had approached from the direction of Nam Tha, a small town of about eighteen hundred people located fifteen miles from the Chinese border.

On January 25, Pathet Lao/NVA infantrymen lobbed a few mortar rounds into the outskirts of Nam Tha. With the approval of Ambassador Brown and General Boyle, Phoumi

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Nov 30, 1961; rprt, Det 10, 2d ADVON, Report on Activities under PACAF Ops Ord 220–62 (Able Mable) to 1 March 1962, n.d.; hist, PACAF, Jul–Dec 61, I, pt A, 19–20.

14. CINCPAC Rcrd, 4th SECDEF Conf, Mar 21, 1962, sp agenda item: Current Situation in Laos and Possible Future Courses of Action; msgs, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 071730Z Jan 62, USARMA Vientiane to DA, DA IN 191004, Jan 9, 1962.

15. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 919, 920, Jan 1, 1962, 937, Jan 4, 1962; CINCPAC to JCS, 030422Z Jan 62; CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 021600Z Jan 62; *New York Times*, Jan 5, 10, 1962. Technically, there was no suspension. The United States merely announced it was "reexamining the whole spectrum of aid to the RLG." [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 943, Jan 5, 1962.]

16. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 270233Z Jan 62.

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reinforced the town garrison, using Laotian C–47s. A few days later, reacting to a hit on a transport, Phoumi brought in four 105-mm howitzers and a dozen 75-mm pack howitzers. He also ordered the T–6s, operating from Nam Tha's dirt airstrip, to attack a reported enemy gun position; but the pilots neither saw nor hit anything. At this point, Boun Oum suddenly announced he was breaking off talks with Souvanna until the latter's troops ended their assaults. Judging the skirmishes around Nam Tha insufficient to warrant such an action, Washington withheld the Royal Laotian Government's February cash payment. Rather than knuckle under a second time, Boun Oum released unsupported currency from the National Bank of Laos.[17]

Enemy action at Nam Tha stepped up. On February 1, the airfield was mortared, forcing the withdrawal of the five remaining T–6s to Luang Prabang. Two days later, the shelling crept to the center of Nam Tha, causing minor civilian panic. Phoumi responded by airlifting several hundred paratroopers fresh from training in Thailand. During this operation, the T–6s flew cover and suppressed mortar fire, while the LAAF transports offloaded on the ground. This reinforcement was undertaken against the advice of General Boyle, who, after an onsite inspection, now suspected a trap; geographically, the area bore a very close resemblance to Dien Bien Phu.[18]

On February 9, enemy shelling destroyed between thirty and forty houses in the town. The next day, Phoumi told Boyle that he intended to further buttress Nam Tha with a parachute battalion from Seno but needed Air America's C–46s to drop the unit. His request was denied by Brown and Boyle, the latter now surer than ever that Phoumi was falling into a trap. The Laotian general brushed aside the MAAG chief's misgivings and used his own C–47s to drop the paratroopers.[19]

General Boyle was seriously concerned over Phoumi's unwillingness to follow his advice. He cabled his anxieties regarding Nam Tha to the JCS and Secretary Rusk, noting that the Laotian general appeared to be purposely inviting military defeat to draw the United States into the conflict. Rusk not only agreed, but further held that the Nam Tha reinforcements, coupled with aggressive patrolling and T–6 strikes, might force or give excuse for the other side to attack the town. On top of this, Maj. Gen. Bounleuth Sanichan (commander of the forces around Nam Tha) had been loading bombs on the T–6s, having gotten the ordnance and fuzes from Marshal Sarit. When this information was confirmed, Ambassador Brown lodged a stiff protest with Phoumi (both were in Geneva at the time) who agreed to order Bounleuth to stop using the bombs. Phoumi's promises notwithstanding, there was the strong suspicion that he would continue to go his own way. Politically, he had shown this by his stubborn refusal to accept a coalition government under Souvanna, and he had openly criticized American policy as leading his country into communist slavery.[20]

Phoumi's attitude and actions drew White House attention. On February 28, President Kennedy directed Admiral Felt to make the United States government's position clear to Phoumi and his chief supporter, Marshal Sarit. Specifically, Felt should tell the Thai leader that the United States would not be drawn into war by his cousin's bullheadedness. Kennedy cautioned that he did not want Phoumi to quit, for his absence from the Laotian political scene would upset the U.S. plan for a balanced coalition. Even so, the President wished Sarit to realize that Phoumi was on a collision course with military disaster. Time was rapidly running out for changing

17. *Ibid*; Dommen, pp 213–14; Toye, pp 180–81; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 204; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1051, 1053, Jan 27, 1962.
18. Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 202; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.
19. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1146, 1151, Feb 10, 1962, 1165, Feb 15, 1962.
20. Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974; msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 726, Feb 10, 1962, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 172143Z Jan 62, DA IN 194258, Jan 19, 1962, Geneva to SECSTATE for action Vientiane, 714, Jan 19, 1962, 10063, Jan 19, 1962, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1021, Jan 20, 1962, 1220, Feb 25, 1962.

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course and cooperating with the United States and Souvanna Phouma. Kennedy hoped Sarit would counsel Phoumi in this direction.[21]

On March 5, 1962, Felt visited Sarit and gave him the President's message. The next day, he met with Phoumi in Bangkok, carefully repeating what he had told Sarit and stressing the need for the Laotian general to join forces with Souvanna in a solid front against the communists. In rebuttal to the "obviously. . . . painful medicine," Phoumi declared he could not be justly charged with an unwillingness to cooperate. The key difference between his and Washington's position was that he believed Souvanna was not a genuine neutralist but merely a front man for Souphanouvong—just as, he noted, Boun Oum was his. By the end of the meeting, however, Phoumi agreed to follow President Kennedy's wishes. Despite this promise, Admiral Felt returned to Honolulu convinced that the President's message had not altered Phoumi's thinking and he was only paying lip service to the idea of cooperating with Souvanna.[22]

Felt's skepticism proved accurate; for another three months Phoumi resisted all U.S. economic and political pressure to bring him to heel. Washington administered the first dose in early March by once again withholding the monthly RLG payment. Phoumi and Boun Oum were left to stew over this action for two weeks. Then, through the energetic efforts of Thailand's Director of Joint Intelligence (Sarit's contact man with Phoumi), a conference was arranged between Sarit, Phoumi, and Averell Harriman (now Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs). On March 24 at the Mekong River town of Nong Khai, Thailand, Sarit told his cousin that he had the choice of being responsible for the military takeover of his country or working with Souvanna to keep it independent. The latter course would receive the full support of the United States, Thailand, and other friendly governments. Sarit urged Phoumi to invite Souvanna to leave his neutralist "capital" at Khangkhai and come to Vientiane. Harriman interjected that any such meeting would be fruitless unless Phoumi was ready to give up the defense and interior ministries.[23]

Unmoved, Phoumi rejected all arguments on the grounds that Souvanna had failed to carry out the royal mandate to form a new government. He did agree to consult his RLG colleagues on future negotiations, and he would not object to Souvanna's coming to Vientiane. These were the only concessions Harriman was able to wring out of Phoumi during the three-hour discussion. The assistant secretary gloomily reported to Washington that Sarit's staunch support for the U.S. position was the sole favorable development of the day.[24]

Yet Harriman did not give up. He flew that same afternoon to Vientiane for an audience with King Savang Vatthana that proved even less productive than the meeting at Nong Khai. As he afterwards reported to the Secretary of State, Harriman depicted Phoumi as the sole obstruction to an independent, neutral Laos. At this, the king jumped to Phoumi's defense, terming the general a "patriotic national leader fighting both the communists and the traditional Viet Minh enemy." King Savang repeated his objection to any government that included the Pathet Lao. Harriman warned that Phoumi's intransigence (by implication, the king's as well) could lead to the loss of American support, ultimate destruction of the kingdom, and overthrow of the monarchy. To this, the king made a gesture of resignation, noting that history was replete with dynastic downfalls and "like all dramas, there must come an end someday." Harriman

21. Boyle intvw, Sept 18, 1974; msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 696, Feb 3, 1962, to AmEmb Bangkok, 1367, Mar 10, 1962; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 202.
22. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1348, Mar 7, 1962, CINCPAC to JCS, 080834Z Mar 62.
23. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1391, Mar 13, 1962, SECSTATE to AmEmb Bangkok, 1492, Mar 20, 1962, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1441, Mar 20, 1962, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1325, Mar 25, 1962.
24. See note above.

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reported that the king was pained to think that the curtain might come down on the last act of the Laotian drama during his reign, but "if this was the way it had to be, however, so be it." The king's fatalistic appraisal of the future led Harriman to conclude that the meeting had been "two hours of futile talk . . . hardly worth reporting."[25]

(S) Assisted by Ambassador Brown and other country team members, Harriman held his final conversations the next day in Vientiane with Boun Oum, Phoumi, and key cabinet members. These talks were likewise unproductive. Shortly thereafter, Harriman's deputy, William Sullivan, traveled to Khangkhai where he assured Souvanna that the United States was doing everything possible to speed the formation of a coalition government.[26]

(S) Although Harriman's face-to-face diplomacy failed, Phoumi and Boun Oum eventually relented. However, their reversal was brought about not so much by U.S. pressure or persuasion as by a FAR military disaster. Four Pathet Lao battalions, spearheaded by the North Vietnamese, drove the FAR from Nam Tha on May 6. The government troops fled in disarray across the Mekong River into Thailand.[27] At the time, elements of the U.S. 27th Infantry Division were on a training exercise in Thailand with the Royal Thailand Army. The Joint Chiefs informed CINCPAC on May 7 that, due to Nam Tha, this force would stay in Thailand until further notice. Three days later, President Kennedy convened the National Security Council to consider a scenario drawn up by Harriman and a close State Department associate, Roger Hilsman.[28] The two men proposed notifying Great Britain, India, and the Soviet Union that the United States earnestly desired a coalition and a neutral Laos and would not tolerate a unilateral communist takeover. To back up these notes, they suggested the Seventh Fleet steam into the Gulf of Siam and roughly one thousand men of the 27th Division be sent to the Thai border opposite Vientiane. Meanwhile, the United States would pressure Phoumi to enter into realistic negotiations. For the long haul, steps would be taken to undermine Phoumi's prestige and political influence. Opposition to him in the FAR and Assembly would be encouraged; and in the end, he would be removed by the Laotians themselves.[29]

(S) The Joint Chiefs supported the diplomatic moves, naval show of force, and deployment of the 27th Division to northeast Thailand. They opposed placing any restraints on Phoumi and urged that all financial and military assistance to him be resumed provided he adhered to U.S. military advice. The chiefs further favored more air support, be it T–6s, B–26s, or a USAF Jungle Jim detachment.[30]

(S) Jungle Jim was the nickname given the all-volunteer 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. It had been formed in April 1961 to train foreign indigenous air force personnel in counterinsurgency operations. Realizing there would be times when the Air Force could not use its first-line aircraft in small wars or insurgencies due to political limitations, General LeMay stocked the unit with T–28s, B–26s, and SC–47s. Jungle Jim became operational in September 1961; and by the end of November, a detachment known as Farm Gate[31] was flying in South Vietnam.[32]

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25. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1336, Mar 26, 1962, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1477, 1478, Mar 26, 1962.
26. (S) Msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1478, Mar 26 1962; Dommen, p 216.
27. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1495, May 6, 1962, 1508, May 7, 1962, 1513, May 3, 1962, CHMAAG Laos to JCS, DA IN 22725, May 6, 1962, DA IN 227338, May 7, 1962, JCS to CINCPAC, 4379, May 6, 1962, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1549, May 12, 1962.
28. (S) Hilsman later succeeded Harriman as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs.
29. (S) Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 4407, May 7, 1962, to COMUSMACV, 4488, 110104Z May 62; Hilsman, pp 142–43.
30. (S) Msg, JCS to COMUSMACV, 4488, 110104Z May 62.
31. (S) Code name applied to Detachment 2, 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, and subsequently to USAF air commando activity at Bien Hoa Air Base, Vietnam.
32. (S) Maj Victor B. Anthony, *Tactics and Techniques of Night Operations, 1961–1970* [The Air Force in Southeast

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The War in Northern Laos

If none of these measures restored the May 3 cease-fire line, the JCS thought SEATO Plan 5 should be put into action with such countries as were willing to join. SEATO Plan 5 was more elaborate than the CINCPAC OPlan 32 series, requiring about twenty-five thousand troops. Both plans called for the Americans gaining control of the major towns in the Mekong valley, thus freeing the FAR to fight the Pathet Lao.[33] Yet, in light of the FAR's fear of the NVA and Pathet Lao units with NVA cadres, the plans were overly optimistic.

President Kennedy elected to defer a final decision until Secretary McNamara and JCS Chairman Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, USA, returned from Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, he authorized Admiral Felt to take certain precautionary steps to shorten the ninety-six-hour starting time for implementing OPlan 32–62. On May 10, Felt ordered the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division on Okinawa to activate JTF 116 headquarters, assemble the staff, and refine embarkation plans. As soon as the embassy at Bangkok received Sarit's clearance, General O'Donnell was to shift four F–100s to Thailand for an "operational visit." Admiral Sides was to give the Marine battalion landing team (BLT) "a good workout ashore," after which the marines should anticipate sailing on the USS *Valley Forge* from Subic Bay to the Gulf of Siam. Finally, Gen. James F. Collins, Commander in Chief, United States Army, Pacific (CINCUSARPAC), was to alert whatever additional units the 27th Infantry Division needed for support. On the 11th, the *Valley Forge* received sailing orders; and Felt asked for JCS permission to offload the BLT at Bangkok, with subsequent airlift to Ubon, Thailand. Felt's request was approved after a National Security Council Meeting on May 12, in which the President was handed the latest information on the Laotian situation from Secretary Rusk and the recently arrived McNamara and Lemnitzer. Their update showed the situation sufficiently grave to warrant additional deployments.[34]

On May 15, CINCPAC established the United States Military Assistance Command, Thailand, naming Gen. Paul D. Harkins, USA, as its commander.[35] Felt next selected Lt. Gen. James L. Richardson, Jr., USA, the deputy CINCUSARPAC, to command JTF 116 under OPlan 32–62. Richardson and his staff left the same day to assume operational control over all U.S. combat units in Thailand. Artillery, engineer, medical, aviation, signal, and ordnance support elements of the 27th Division were airlifted from Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii on the 16th. They joined the rest of the division at Ubon the next day. The Maine BLT was also scheduled for Ubon, but, due to RTG objections set up camp at Korat. For air support, a Marine attack squadron of twenty A–4D Skyhawks flew from Cubi Point, Philippines, to Takhli Air Base, Thailand. There it was teamed with the 510th Tactical Fighter Squadron of twenty F–100s from Clark Air Base, Philippines.[36]

The increase in air resources was significant. If the United States had to intervene in Laos, Admiral Felt believed the key was air power. From the outset, he envisioned a large-scale interdiction campaign against enemy airfields, supply dumps, troop concentrations, and lines of communication. If necessary, North Vietnam should be struck as well, but Felt and General O'Donnell agreed that strikes into North Vietnam might be politically unpalatable. However, they took a strong stand against any rules of engagement that would restrict air power and result in undue loss of American lives or prolong the fighting. They disagreed about the effect a Chinese intervention might have on air operations. O'Donnell believed the Chinese would at once shift air units south and try to take out the American (Thai) bases. While not denying this possibility,

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Asia] (Washington, 1973), pp 1–2.

33. Msg, JCS to COMUSMACV, 4488, 110104Z May 62.

34. Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 214.

35. USMACTHAI was set up without consulting the RTG. This was to have a detrimental effect on U.S.-Thai relations in 1964–65 (see Chapters VI and VII).

36. Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 214.; msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 4527, 130231Z May 62.

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Felt held that carrier aircraft from the Seventh Fleet and USAF planes based in Thailand could stop them.[37]

Meanwhile, the debacle of Nam Tha had shattered President Kennedy's confidence in Phoumi as a military leader. For the past few months, Phoumi had consistently disregarded General Boyle's views and repeatedly gone back on his word. In Secretary Rusk's opinion, Phoumi had stubbornly resisted any political agreement that would have removed the North Vietnamese units from Laos and averted Nam Tha. Then, too, rumors persisted that he had deliberately invited a major engagement to embarrass the United States and call its hand on the matter of military support. Accordingly, the President decided that Phoumi must be brought under control and his influence within the Laotian government diminished—the ultimate aim being his elimination from power.[38]

As a first step, Kennedy wanted the general removed from any political post and returned to full time duty as FAR commander.[39] While Phoumi tended to his "military knitting" under MAAG guidance, the United States would help reorganize the RLG. At the same time, Ambassador Brown was to spread the word to the principal political military leaders in Vientiane that Washington blamed Phoumi for the current state of affairs and that it had lost confidence in his ability. Furthermore, the new MAAG chief, Maj. Gen. Reuben H. Tucker, USA, was to tell Phoumi that Nam Tha was the direct result of his deliberate disregard of American advice. Tucker should stress that, since the United States was bearing the entire cost of equipping the Royal Army, its prestige was tied closely to FAR conduct. Washington could not tolerate situations in which the FAR "capriciously loses its military equipment, scatters its best fighting units and generally incubates fiascos by willfully ignoring MAAG guidance."[40]

A subdued Phoumi Nosavan met with Ambassador Brown on May 10 to discuss Nam Tha. From the outset, Brown pinned the blame on the Laotian defense minister, his incompetent officers, and his mulish refusal to follow Boyle's advice to reduce his forces at the town. This military reversal should convince him that he and Boun Oum could not hope to win by force of arms. The sole solution was a political settlement. Hence, in response to Souvanna's recent statements, Brown urged Phoumi to give up the defense and interior ministries. Phoumi readily conceded Nam Tha had shredded his political and military leadership and cast serious doubts on the competence of some of his senior officers. He agreed to yield defense and interior to the neutralists and would resume three-party negotiations. Phoumi's one stipulation was that all important decisions be made jointly and that the armed forces and civil administration remain as constituted pending an agreement on national integration.[41]

As instructed by Washington, General Tucker called on Phoumi three days later. After repeating what Brown had said, Tucker presented a list of reforms (actually demands) he thought essential to rehabilitating relations between the advisory group and the FAR general. They included removing incompetent officers and heeding MAAG advice in selecting replacements, developing a first-class NCO corps, reorganizing the ministry of defense and delegating ample authority to major staff officers, and making the logistic command efficient. In addition, better use would be made of training facilities, with the MAAG chief having final approval for units nominated for training. Phoumi would likewise need Tucker's endorsement on plans, tactical

37. [redacted] Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 208; CINCPAC Rcrd, 4th SECDEF Conf, Mar 21, 1962.
38. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 987, May 12, 1962.
39. [redacted] Phoumi was never "FAR commander" but represented the coalition of generals then in control of the army. At first, having close ties with the CIA, he could always "deliver the goods"; but once he lost this support, his power position became quite shaky and eventually the Laotian generals—not the U.S. government—would see to it that he was removed (see Chapter VII).
40. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 987, May 12, 1962.
41. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1527, May 9, 1962, 1530, May 10, 1962.

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operations, and deployments of battalions and larger units. If Phoumi concurred, the FAR troops that had fled to Thailand would be repatriated using Air America transports.[42]

Tucker's presentation was a bitter pill for Phoumi to swallow, but for now he had little choice. The United States was financing his army, and he knew Nam Tha had lowered his prestige in American eyes. He pledged closer cooperation with Tucker but innocently asserted that long ago he ordered all his commanders to cooperate freely with their MAAG and White Star[43] counterparts. He assured the MAAG chief that his counsel would be sought on any new FAR defense plans. Based on this understanding, Tucker began airlifting back to Laos the three thousand men that had fled to Thailand.[44]

While acceding to Washington's demands, Phoumi was not as weak as he appeared, explaining away Nam Tha as the result of intervention by an overwhelming NVA and Chinese force. Despite President Kennedy's public statements that the current U.S. military moves were in support of SEATO, they were seen in Vientiane as further backing for Phoumi. Ambassador Brown noted that regardless of what he might say about the need to remove him, no Laotian would dare try it as long as the general controlled the police and army. The Laotians considered Phoumi to be an American creation, and it was up to the United States to get rid of him.[45]

On the other side of the coin, Phoumi was not as powerful as he was made out to be. He could go just so far in meeting General Tucker's terms. For example, after receiving the MAAG chief's blessing, Phoumi designated Laos a single military theater divided into northern and southern fronts with headquarters at Vientiane and Savannakhet respectively. The fronts were subdivided into zones closely approximating the old military regions. As theater commander (actually, field commander of the FAR), Phoumi "appointed" General Bounleuth, who had fled Nam Tha in the early hours of the first day's battle. Bounleuth was evaluated by Tucker as being incapable of "leading a squad around the corner," but he and Ouane Rathikone, FAR Chief of Staff were the senior generals in the army. Bounleuth not only outranked Phoumi but was from the northern part of the country while Phoumi was a southerner, and the practice among the generals was to keep a balance between the two sections of the country. Lastly, Bounleuth had solid political backing (he was a favorite of the king) and could not be shunted aside despite his well-known shortcomings.[46]

That the FAR was not a national army shaped along Western lines was underscored by Phoumi's position with the other generals. Rather, the generals were a group of local military commanders who had reached the top through the influence and assistance of the important families of each particular region. In many instances, they were members of these families.[47]

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42. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1552, 1553, May 13, 1962; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 206.

43. White Star mobile training teams consisted of Special Forces personnel from Okinawa. They acted as cadres for Phoumi's troops but were most adept in working with Vang Pao's guerrilla fighters. [Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, 184.]

44. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1552, 1553, May 13, 1962; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 206.; msg, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 2510, 130515Z May 62.

45. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1553, May 13, 1962.

46. Msgs, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 3037, 060645Z Jun 62, USARMA Vientiane to DA, DA IN 238127, Jun 11, 1962. General Tucker's evaluation of General Bounleut is in message, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 180848Z May 62. The rest of the paragraph is based on Uiberall interview, March 13, 1974.

47. Maj Gen Kouprasith Abhay, Phoumi's chief rival for power and Military Region V Commander, is a good example. The Abhay family was influential and wealthy in its own right; Kouprasith's uncle, Kou Abhay, had once been prime minister. More important, the general's mother and wife were each a Sananikone—the most powerful and wealthy family in the country save Boun Oum's. [Sp rprt 0403/70A, Dir/Intel, CIA, Elements of Non-communist Politics in Laos, Dec 31, 1970.] The MAAG deemed Kouprasith a competent officer, one of the few who sought American advice. He was also well liked by his men; his visits to the forward units on an average of once a week were unusual for senior Laotian officers. [Rprt, JUSMAGTHAI, Final Report of Military Assistance and Advisory Group, Laos, Nov 6, 1962; Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974.]

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Phoumi could not replace them without offending and causing loss of face. Besides, with but a very small club from which to draw, where could he have gotten replacements? Consequently, Phoumi was not going to take such a drastic step simply because Tucker objected to an officer's military competence.[48] Moreover, the MAAG would withdraw once a peace settlement was reached, and Phoumi wisely grasped that he would have to face the consequences for any of his rash or harsh actions. It was far easier to first accede to Tucker's demands and then weasel around them.

In early June, the three princes met on the Plain of Jars for a series of talks. By the 11th, they agreed on a coalition government with seven cabinet posts going to Souvanna's neutralists, four each to the Pathet Lao and to Phoumi's group, and four to the so-called right-wing neutralists (men who had remained in Vientiane but uncommitted to Phoumi). Souvanna would be prime minister with Souphanouvong and Phoumi as deputy prime ministers. Phoumi also headed the ministry of finance and could continue to control American funds, including those earmarked for Souphanouvong's ministry of planning. A key provision stipulated that either deputy could veto a decision in cabinet session. Thus unanimity was required on all important decisions. On June 14, U.S. financial aid resumed; and on the 23d, Boun Oum resigned, publicly announcing his retirement from politics. The following day, Souvanna was installed as prime minister. All three factions now pledged to restore communications between their territories and to rekindle the reconciliation process.[49]

A unified Laotian delegation flew to Geneva; and on July 23, 1962, fourteen nations signed the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos. The signatories agreed not to interfere in the sovereignty, independence, neutrality, unity, or territorial integrity of the kingdom, including its internal affairs. As in 1954, Laos was forbidden from entering into any military alliance. (Souvanna had previously declared he would not accept SEATO's protection.) No nation could establish a military base on Laotian territory nor introduce troops or military personnel except for diplomatically accredited attachés and a few French military instructors. Within seventy-five days, all foreign troops then in the country, including those serving as advisors and technicians, would be withdrawn. Finally, the Royal Laotian Government was allowed to acquire whatever conventional armaments it considered necessary for the country's defense.[50]

Like the earlier Geneva accords, the 1962 convention was full of loopholes. The International Control Commission (Canada, Poland, and India) would stay, but there was still no provision for stationing inspection teams in the countryside. Accordingly, keeping track of foreign troops and arms in the mountainous, jungle terrain of northern Laos and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail was nearly impossible. The RLG could request investigation of incidents that might upset the peace or touch off hostilities. The ICC could carry out such inquiries by majority vote, yet—and this was a key provision—any conclusions or recommendations needed unanimous adoption. Unanimous ICC decisions were also demanded on questions pertaining to the withdrawal or prohibition of foreign troops, military personnel, and armaments.[51]

In keeping with the spirit of neutrality, Souvanna quickly established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, North Vietnam, and several East European countries. On his way home from Geneva, he stopped off in Washington where he talked with key State Department officers and President Kennedy. The Chief Executive repeated his support for Souvanna's neutralist policies but questioned the sincerity of the Pathet Lao and North

48. Later on, Souvanna Phouma appointed incompetent officers to such innocuous positions as inspector general or military adviser to the king. Too often, however, the prime minister had to wait until the officer retired before he could be replaced.
49. Toye, p 186; Dommen, p 220; Department of State Circular 2109, Jun 15, 1962.
50. Dommen, p 225.
51. *Ibid*, pp 225–26.

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Vietnamese. Souvanna replied that in his recent conversations with Pham Van Dong, North Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs, he was assured that NVA troops would be withdrawn. On the question of the FAR, Souvanna said there would no longer be "private armies." He envisioned gradual integration of the Pathet Lao and a large-scale civic action program using troops for public works projects. As integration progressed so would demobilization. Souvanna estimated the new FAR would consist of fifteen thousand to twenty thousand men. On June 28, Kennedy announced that Leonard Unger, a career diplomat and former deputy chief of mission and consul in Bangkok, had replaced Winthrop G. Brown as Ambassador to Laos.[52]

(U) Although the United States expressed satisfaction with the 1962 accords and Souvanna's neutralist government, a number of problems persisted. One was Phoumi's relationship with the United States. The administration hoped to solve this problem by having Phoumi returned to a purely military role and ultimately removed from power. Other chief concerns entailed the MAAG, the Meo paramilitary force, and the continued development of the FAR and RLAF.

(U) During the winter of 1961–62, as events at Geneva and in Laos pointed to a possible neutralist coalition, plans were drawn for terminating the MAAG. Yet, there needed to be some form of U.S. military assistance to the RLG in the post-hostilities period. On March 21, 1962, Admiral Felt proposed that the old Programs Evaluation Office be resurrected and charged with this responsibility, using military personnel under civilian cover. Early in April, he urged that such an organization become part of the ambassador's country team.[53]

(U) Washington, however, did not favor returning to a PEO. Still, some way had to be found to fill the void left by the departing MAAG and keep an eye on General Phoumi. After lengthy discussions between State, Defense, and the Agency for International Development (AID), it was decided that the MAP functions could be performed by a section in the embassy's AID office of fourteen to sixteen men. Felt thought this plan satisfactory but doubted if the group would be large enough since General Tucker recommended forty-two as the minimum needed. In any case, CINCPAC believed the men selected should be either regular military in civilian attire, carefully selected reservists, or younger retired officers. He also urged a small augmentation of the attaché office, mostly to handle intelligence collection.[54]

(U) Secretary McNamara finally decided to reorganize the MAAG and relocate it in Bangkok with an advanced echelon at the Peppergrinder depot south of Udorn. General Tucker would remain its head under the pseudonym of Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand (DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI). As the "MAAG in exile," it would deal with Laos but have no external identification with the kingdom. It was authorized sixty-four U.S. Army and six U.S. Air Force spaces. If the coalition government failed, this cadre could be expanded and returned to Laos. Tucker's primary mission until that happened was "planning, programming, requisitioning, receipt and storage in Thailand and onward shipment of material to Laos." To work closely with the FAR and validate its requirements, twenty-five spaces were added to the embassy AID section as the requirements office (RO). The RO was to prepare, review, and monitor the defense support budget, and receive, store, and maintain all MAP equipment. It would be staffed by military retirees or civilians experienced in military assistance or logistics.[55] McNamara further approved more officers for the attaché's office to strengthen U.S. intelligence and assist in any military programming after the departure of the MAAG. The final strength was

52. (U) *Ibid*, pp 226–28; memo of conversation, The President and His Highness Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prime Minister, subj: Meeting with Prince Souvanna Phouma, Jul 27, 1962.
53. (U) Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, pp 215, 219.
54. (U) *Ibid*, p 220.
55. (U) The bulk of the RO personnel were subsequently located in Vientiane with several stationed in the major towns outside the capital. The requirement that they be bona fide retired officers or civilians was set forth in memo, SECDEF to CJCS, subj: Augmentation of Military Attaché Strength in Laos, Aug 11, 1962, in JCS 2344/59.

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two USAF officers, two airmen, a USAF aircraft, four U.S. Army officers, two soldiers, and an Army aircraft. (In mid-June 1962, 866 U.S. personnel had been assigned to or under the control of MAAG Laos and 465 Filipino ECCOIL personnel had been in MAAG employ.) Also, the air attaché's diplomatic accreditation to Saigon and Phnom Penh was dropped.[56]

With the Geneva agreement on Laos signed, Admiral Felt ordered General Tucker to start withdrawing the MAAG. At first, it was planned to move forty-five Special Forces personnel out early in the seventy-five-day withdrawal period. The ambassador liked this idea because it would show the good intentions of the United States, but Felt wanted them to stay until the last fifteen days of the period to check on the reciprocal retirement by the North Vietnamese. Felt would likewise draw out the exodus of the other MAAG members. "I want the final departure . . . to be of significant size," he said, "with flags flying and tails over the dashboard." Despite CINCPAC's desires, the withdrawal was incremental, with most of the men gone by October 6, 1962. On that date—the seventy-fifth day following the signing of the accords—General Tucker and a small MAAG group passed through the ICC checkpoint. All activities of MAAG Laos had ended. In contrast, just forty North Vietnamese soldiers went through the ICC checkpoints, though intelligence reports showed "several thousand" NVA troops had left. Still, these same sources acknowledged that several thousand had stayed behind.[57]

One reason the Americans were not entirely sure how many North Vietnamese had departed was that they did not ever know precisely how many had been in the country to begin with. The North Vietnamese had constantly asserted they had but a handful of troops in Laos, and passing only forty through the ICC lent credence to their claims. However, Meo intelligence teams reported an ongoing NVA presence in Laos. Many merely put on Pathet Lao uniforms, while others were seen constructing and repairing roads as well as moving or trucking from one area to another. In fact, the Meo were occasionally spotted and firefights erupted between them and the enemy. Then, too, the Pathet Lao refused to let the neutralists back into Samneua Province where, it was rumored, an entire NVA regiment was stationed. Souvanna would not take the problem to the ICC despite Ambassador Unger's urging, preferring first to work within his troika government. Finally, on October 13, Phoumi's group finally protested the NVA presence and furnished specific locations on many remaining troops. In response, the Pathet Lao called on the ICC to investigate the RO's clandestine nature and the CIA agents it contended were hidden in the embassy under civilian cover. Although Air America was permitted to operate under the Geneva accords as a civilian contract airline, the Pathet Lao demanded it halt all resupply missions, particularly those to Meo outposts in Pathet Lao territory.[58]

For two years [redacted] had painstakingly woven together the Meo intelligence network. While this network could reliably identify isolated pockets or garrisons of NVA troops, aerial reconnaissance was judged a much better way to determine communist compliance with the withdrawal provisions of the Geneva accords. After Nam Tha fell, CINCPAC directed PACAF to send one solid-nose and one glass-nose Black Watch[59] RB–26 to Don Muang. These two aircraft were equipped for low-level and medium-altitude night

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56. [redacted] Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, pp 220–21; JCS 2344/59, Augmentation of Militry Attache Strength in Laos, Jul 22, 1962; msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 1154, Jun 19, 1962, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1776, Jun 21, 1962; Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968; Hearings before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commmitments Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Senate, *United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Kingdom of Laos*, 91st Cong, 1st sess (Washington, 1970), p 423 [hereafter cited as *Laos Hearings*].

57. [redacted] Hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 218; Dommen, pp 239–240.

58. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 517, Sep 29, 1962, 597, Oct 13, 1962, to OSD, 181235Z Nov 62; memo, William H. Brubeck, Exec Secy of McGeorge Bundy, White House, subj: Laos, Nov 1, 1962.

59. [redacted] Code name of the night reconnaissance missions over Laos.

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photography and would supplement Able Mable reconnaissance. All told, fifty Black Watch missions were flown between May 29 and July 21, 1962. Even so, the RB–26 camera system was eventually deemed inadequate, due to the limited film capacity of the magazines. In early August, these planes were transferred to the Farm Gate detachment at Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam, leaving reconnaissance over Laos solely to the RF–101s. Then, on August 14, one of the Voodoos was damaged by enemy AA fire over the Plain of Jars. The right access door, about five feet long and with three-quarters of the U.S. insignia on it, was blown off and recovered by the Pathet Lao. The flights were immediately suspended.[60]

(S) Ambassador Kenneth T. Young in Bangkok wondered whether Able Mable should resume, in light of a buildup in enemy antiaircraft assets during the past few weeks. After all, the present Royal Laotian Government had given no green light for the Air Force to fly aerial reconnaissance. He would have nothing to say if the flights began again and an RF–101 was shot down over enemy territory. The cover story asserted the aircraft were at Don Muang for joint training and only now and then carried out reconnaissance at the RLG's request. That story would no longer hold water.[61]

(S) Ambassador Unger saw the RF–101 incident of August 14 as stirring serious doubts in Souvanna's mind regarding American sincerity. It came at a time when the prince was trying to convince Souphanouvong that the United States had abandoned "covert alternative lines of action" and that it was working for a neutral solution. Unger wanted to make a clean breast of the episode and assure Souvanna there would be no further overflights by USAF aircraft without the prime minister's permission. Besides, this would be an ideal time to remind him that on several occasions unarmed Air America transports carrying food and medical supplies to civilians and refugees had been fired at by the Pathet Lao.[62]

(S) When it became clear that Souvanna was not going to make an issue of the reconnaissance mission, the State Department told Unger not to approach him on the subject. If he inquired, Unger was to say the overflights were by unarmed aircraft and were permitted under previous agreements with the RLG (meaning Phoumi). Moreover, Souvanna should expect them to continue as long as U.S. personnel were in the country. For Unger's benefit, however, Under Secretary of State George W. Ball assured the ambassador the reconnaissance flights had been canceled.[63]

(S) The decision to end Able Mable missions over Laos displeased the Air Force. In a paper for an August 24 State/Defense meeting, the Air Staff pointed out that these flights were the only reliable check on communist compliance with the withdrawal provisions of the Geneva accords. Suspending photo reconnaissance was particularly bad in light of repeated Pathet Lao refusals to let the RLG or ICC enter its areas. Despite these arguments, Able Mable was withdrawn in December after 720 missions leaving the Meos, once again, as the primary source of intelligence.[64]

(S) In July 1961, Secretary McNamara had asked the Joint Chiefs to examine a proposal for the Defense Department to assume responsibility for Meo operations. After thorough consideration, the chiefs concluded that the present arrangement should not be disrupted. They recognized that the effectiveness of the Meo was due, not only to their tribal cohesiveness, but to their willingness to follow an ethnic leader they could trust. [redacted] Vientiane, had exploited these characteristics by extending efficient financial, logistic, and training support. This in turn had strengthened Vang Pao's resistance and self-confidence against the Pathet

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60. (S) Hists, PACAF, Jan–Jun 62, III, pt 2, A–3, 13th AF, 1962, I, p II–63; msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 254, Aug 14, 1962; Background Paper, Dir/Plans, USAF, USAF Aerial Reconnaissance in Laos, Aug 23, 1962; Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961–1966*, p 7.
61. (S) Msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 254, Aug 14, 1962.
62. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 230, Aug 16, 1962.
63. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 190, Aug 16, 1962.
64. (S) Background Paper, Dir/Plans, USAF, Aug 23, 1962; Smith, *USAF Reconnaissance in Southeast Asia, 1961–1966*, p 6.

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Lao. Any change would lower his morale and that of his followers. The distrust of the Meo for the Lao (and vice versa) was also noted, [redacted] The Joint Chiefs believed that under those circumstances, it would be difficult for Defense to assume a role [redacted] They were, nevertheless, willing to deploy more air assets on behalf of Meo activity. (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

Admiral Felt had opposed the change for basically the same reasons. He commented that General Boyle had reached agreement [redacted] whereby a few White Star teams would assist [redacted] personnel in training the Meo. Having evolved under actual operational conditions, this arrangement was highly successful and should not be disturbed. [redacted] On October 4, the JCS informed CINCPAC that McNamara had accepted their views. Supplying, training, and financing of the Meo would remain unchanged until the withdrawal of the MAAG. Three weeks later, Washington notified the embassy they could recruit another one thousand Meo, bringing the authorized force level to twelve thousand.[66] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

The country team had earlier suggested (January 12, 1962) a further expansion of local defense and resistance capabilities of the population in northern and central Laos (not necessarily Meo). The aim was to cut down further Pathet Lao encroachments in these areas. The team realized it would be advantageous to any Laotian government (pro-Western or neutral) to keep these areas as much as possible out of communist hands. Then, too, the various mountain tribes that made up most of the population in northern Laos did not like the Pathet Lao. Armed, they could disrupt supply lines and deny the Pathet Lao local sources of supplies, intelligence, and manpower; and the RLG could gain valuable information on Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese political and military activities in these areas. Also, tribesmen along the frontier between Laos and North Vietnam could observe NVA compliance with any promise not to infiltrate Laos or South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It was understood that Air America would need more helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. Helicopter strips and STOL airfields for handling them would likewise have to be built. This would enhance the mobility and thus the tactics of the Meo and other tribesmen. On February 5, [redacted] secured clearance for this fresh expansion of its unconventional warfare.[67] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

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Comments of communist delegates at Geneva six months later showed beyond a doubt that the program to arm the Meo and other minority people was more than just a burr under the Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese Army saddle. Specifically, the Soviet delegation voiced concern over Air America's continually dropping supplies to the tribesmen. They strongly hinted that such "provocations" might torpedo the conference. The State Department was not as disturbed over the Russians as it was over Souvanna, who might insist these supplies be cut off. Secretary Rusk instructed the American delegation to convince him that it was in his best interest to have the noncommunist minority groups loyal to the government.[68]

Souvanna was noncommittal, however. Not until his return to Vientiane did he give Unger formal permission to continue the Air America airlift of supplies, medicine, and rice (no arms) to the hill people. Souvanna made it clear that in the future the Meo must look to

65. JCSM-61-62, Contingency Planning for Department of Defense Assumption of Responsibility for Support of Meo Operations, Jan 27, 1962.

66. Boyle intvw, Sep 18, 1974; *US COIN Ops in Laos, 1955–1962*, p C–30; msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, DA IN 156147, Sep 29, 1961, JCS to CINCPAC, 1751, Oct 4, 1961.

67. JCSM-61-62, Contingency Planning for Department of Defense Assumption of Responsibility for Support of Meo Operations, Jan 27, 1962.

68. Msgs, SECSTATE to US Mission, Geneva FE Conf, 973, Jul 16, 1962, US Mission, Geneva FE Conf, to SECSTATE, 1257, Jul 17, 1962.

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Vientiane for such aid and not the United States. In spite of the airlift, the Pathet Lao kept on harassing and attacking Meo strong-holds in Samneua and Xieng Khouang Provinces. Although Souvanna believed this pressure would soon ease up, he urged Vang Pao to abandon some of the isolated outposts and consolidate his forces at not less than battalion strength. Ambassador Unger thought this made sense militarily, but he still could not understand why the Meo should give up positions legitimately occupied, especially when a cease-fire was supposed to be in force. Souvanna promised to discuss the matter with his brother. Nonetheless, through the remainder of the dry season, the pressure on the Meo and other [redacted] tribesmen mounted.[69]

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The T–6 section remained an enigma, the bright outlook of the previous year having dimmed. Of the 140 recorded strikes in 1962, the Americans judged no more than 10 successful. Pilots reported they could not locate their targets even though reliable aerial photography was abundant. They kept firing their guns and rockets out of range and failed to press home their attack, even in undefended areas. The lack of a suitable gunnery range prevented the correction of these shortcomings. Moreover, the Air Force MAAG instructors viewed the "vacillation of U.S. policy" as a roadblock to orderly planning and implementation of improvements such as the conversion from T–6s to T–28s. Their final report underscored that

> it will never be possible [for Laos] to maintain an Air Force without outside technical assistance. Even with a concerted effort on the part of the US, it will be 1970 before the RLAF could be expected to maintain the simplest type aircraft.[70]

In March 1962, during a battlefield lull around Nam Tha, General Boyle had asked CINCPAC to replace three T–6s damaged beyond repair. With but five Harvards left, the RLAF badly needed strike aircraft. The State Department opposed the move on the grounds that it would abet Phoumi's stubborn refusal to accept a coalition government. The T–6s were replaced, but General Boyle vented his irritation to Admiral Felt over State's using critically needed military equipment as a political lever. He was concerned that the delivery of fourteen MAP T–28s set for May might become enmeshed in similar political considerations. These aircraft would soon be needed to counter the buildup in enemy armor on the Plain of Jars.[71]

However, the Laotian pilots had to go through a T–28 transition and upgrading program before they could use the T–28s. Because of the touchy political situation in Laos, Admiral Felt proposed transferring three T–28s from South Vietnam to the RTAF training base at Kokotiem for this purpose. Colonel Thao Ma, RLAF chief, initially refused to let his pilots enter T–28 training prior to the arrival of the planes. After Nam Tha, he became as pliable as Phoumi, and the program proceeded on schedule, led by five USAF instructors, three from MAAG Laos and the rest from a PACAF mobile training team. The program began in May with the first class of six pilots. When the program finished on August 22, twelve pilots had received instruction in formation flying, night operations, instruments, navigation, and gunnery. The T–28s supplied by CINCPAC lacked adequate instruments for night training; and the pilots were trained solely in day gunnery, dive bombing, and skip bombing. Employment of rockets and napalm was also omitted because of equipment shortages. Felt's plan also embraced ground personnel, and forty-eight mechanics (one-third each being Lao, ECCOIL, and RTAF) received both classroom instruction and on-the-job training.[72]

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69. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 222, Aug 17, 1962, 328, Sep 2, 1962, 531, Oct 3, 1962.
70. Rprt, MAAG Laos, Aug 21, 1962.
71. Msgs, CHMAAG Laos to CINCPAC, 120550Z Mar 62, 010800Z Apr 62, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1451, Mar 22, 1962. One U.S. intelligence report estimated nearly ninety tanks in Pathet Lao/NVA hands. The number adjudged to be on the Plain of Jars was not stated. [*PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 14–62, Apr 6, 1962, 13.]
72. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 112307Z Apr 62; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 212; rprt, AIRA Vientiane, Annual FWAIS S–3632, Sep 26, 1962; Rprt, MAAG Laos, Summary of Operations, Fiscal Year 62, Royal Laos Air Force, Aug 21, 1962; hist, CINCPAC, 1962, p 212.

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The Decline of Phoumi

(U) Despite the training at Kokotiem, the MAP T–28s were not sent to Laos. Secretary McNamara had directed, as early as April 27, that, following overseas shipment, the planes be held in Thailand until the political climate cleared. By mid-August, the aircraft were still in the United States. When Phoumi pressed Unger for them, the ambassador replied his government would not give the FAR any more equipment since it was already well supplied. Moreover, the recently signed Geneva accords called for a major demobilization so there was no need for the T–28s. Unger did say that once the new unified Laotian armed forces were organized, the Government of National Union could assess the situation. Then, if it still wanted the planes, Washington would review its stand. So at the end of 1962, the RLAF was flying obsolete T–6 fighters. In the interim, the T–28s that had been earmarked for Laos were converted to reconnaissance versions and shipped to South Vietnam.[73]

(U) Other aspects of the RLAF were somewhat better. Total strength rose from 447 to 558 (against 721 authorized). This gain, mostly in the general service area, was attained by recruiting out of other branches of the FAR. At the same time, 43 Laotians had qualified for the MAAG-sponsored on-the-job training in maintenance, supply, and communications. The most chronic shortage at year's end was adequately trained ground personnel, stemming from the stress placed on checking out pilots.[74]

(U) The absence of an RLAF training base or camp inside Laos was a principal handicap to a successful ground school program. Likewise, no classification system designed along USAF lines existed, and there were no skill levels to denote proficiency—the Laotians considered any technical school graduate to be at the top of the proficiency ladder. A prime example was the attitude of the handful of French-trained technicians who returned to Laos in late 1961. Their training differed so radically from that given by the U.S. Air Force that the MAAG realized retraining was in order. Naturally, these men were not enthusiastic over this prospect and objected strenuously, citing their French diploma as proof of competence. It was not until Thao Ma stepped in and ruled in favor of the MAAG advisors that these men agreed to take more training.[75]

(U) To the Americans, no Laotian was presumed qualified above the apprentice level, and the only practical solution was on-the-job training. It was conducted informally; and the handicaps of language, motivation, and inadequate manuals and study materials remained. The skill levels were so low that Air Force MAAG personnel concluded the Laotians could not supervise their on-the-job training, much less teach formal courses. They pessimistically predicted that, at the current snail's pace, it would be mid-1966 or 1967 before sufficient Laotian graduates of stateside training schools would be available to serve as ground school instructors. Until this point was reached, the "chaotic, no-progress system" would prevail.[76]

(U) Against these dire predictions, certain areas showed promise. The English language trainer was uncrated and set up in Savannakhet. Qualified instructors were still in short supply, although offset to some extent by Thao Ma's constant enthusiastic support. The eight C–47s of the RLAF transport section (eleven combat-ready crews) sustained a high utilization rate, logging an average of 250 hours a month during the last quarter of fiscal year 1962. Much of this airlift was hauling troops and cargo to active zones and making supply drops. Even so, the American advisors complained about the transports being used for "passenger convenience," strongly hinting that too often they supported illegal operations such as gold and opium smuggling.[77]

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73. [redacted] Msgs, SECDEF to CINCPAC, 270014Z Apr 62, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 206, Aug 12, 1962, CINCPAC to CSAF, 191320Z Oct 62.
74. [redacted] Rprt, MAAG Laos, Aug 21, 1962; rprt, AIRA Vientiane, Sep 26, 1962.
75. [redacted] See note above.
76. [redacted] Rprt, MAAG Laos, Aug 21, 1962.
77. [redacted] *Ibid.*

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The War in Northern Laos

In early October, Souvanna sent identical letters to Soviet Ambassador Sergei Afanasseyev and U.S. Ambassador Unger asking for assistance in flying supplies to neutralist forces in remote areas. The Russians responded by giving the Royal Laotian Government the Ilyushin transports that had been flying between Vinh, Hanoi, and the Plain of Jars. They also offered to fly the aircraft until Laotian crews could be trained. In addition, the Soviets suggested that fifty men from each faction be sent to the Soviet Union for pilot and mechanic training.[78]

The State Department was pleased but not surprised by Souvanna's request for American aid. For some time, intelligence revealed that the "marriage" between Kong Le (now a brigadier general) and the Pathet Lao had been one of convenience. Defectors told of troubles and strained relations between the two groups. For example, much of the material brought in by the Soviet airlift to the Plain of Jars had been expropriated by the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. What was left went to Kong Le's men. In this way, the communists controlled whatever passed to the neutralists who were now running short of critically needed food, clothing, and ammunition. On top of this, the Pathet Lao had infiltrated their "allies" and were accusing Kong Le of no longer being a "true neutralist."[79]

Reportedly due to pressure from the Pathet Lao, the Soviets dallied over the precise number of planes they intended giving Souvanna as well as the turnover data. In consequence, the tension on the Plain of Jars grew. Rumors circulated in Vientiane that Kong Le was completely surrounded. On November 20, Souvanna received a request from Col. Ketsana Vongsouvan, the neutralist commander at Khangkhai, for ammunition for his U.S. carbines. The prime minister passed the request to the American embassy. After discussing it with his country team, Unger concluded that the neutralist army might start to fall apart if he failed to deliver. This in turn would significantly weaken Souvanna's position within the troika government. Unger admitted that introducing U.S. war materials into the Plain of Jars at this juncture might be touchy, but he believed the material and psychological benefit outweighed the risk. Accordingly, he authorized Air America to fly supplies to Ketsana's forces.[80]

Again at Souvanna's bidding, Unger dispatched an Air America C–123 Provider on November 29 to the Plain of Jars with food and supplies. While on the final turn in the traffic pattern, the plane was hit by antiaircraft fire. It caught fire and crashlanded; only an air cargo specialist survived.[81] Though neutralist soldiers at once surrounded the AA battery, its commander had escaped and no one was really sure who gave the fire order.[82]

Ambassador Unger sensed the hand of the Pathet Lao behind the C–123 loss. After the cease-fire, enemy propaganda against Air America had quickened, fueled by the logistic help given the Meo. In fact, the airline's planes had been shot at seventeen times since mid-October, the crews accepting it as a way of life. Now, besides resupplying the Meo, Air America was acting as an alternate source of airborne supply for Kong Le. Unger assumed the Pathet Lao

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78. Dommen, pp 234–35; *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 43–62, Oct 24, 1962, p 11. Eventually, the neutralists met their quota and Phoumi ordered fifty RLAF personnel to report as well, although the latter never took their training in the Soviet Union. Having few men qualified, the Pathet Lao sent no one but later supplied a list of potential candidates. [Msg, [redacted] AF IN 34102, Jan 16, 1964.] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

79. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 530, 531, Oct 3, 1962, 603, Oct 15, 1962, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 446, Oct 16, 1962. CIA

80. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 772, Nov 20, 1962; *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 50–62, Dec 14, 1962, p 11. The USAF contract with Air America had been transferred from the MAAG to the director of Agency for International Development, Laos, for operational control on September 26. Thus, AID was in a position to carry on when the MAAG left. [Msg, CHMAAG China to SECDEF, 260703Z Sep 62; ltr A–75, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Contract between USAID and Air America, Sep 26, 1962.]

81. Just the day before, Unger had landed at the same field for a first-hand inspection of neutralist living conditions.

82. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 806, 809, Nov 27, 1962, 818, Nov 28, 1962.

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could not tolerate this and had retaliated. No longer able to vouch for the safety of the Air America aircraft and crews, the ambassador temporarily suspended their flights to the Plain of Jars.[83]

Later information disclosed that disaffected neutralists led by Kong Le's deputy, Lt. Col. Deuan Sunnalath, had shot down the transport, not the Pathet Lao. Nonetheless, Souvanna was certain the act was "Pathet Lao-inspired." He discussed the incident with Souphanouvong, who proffered the excuse that maybe the mission had not been coordinated between Vientiane and the airfield. Souvanna knew the flight had been cleared, and his brother's remarks confirmed his suspicion that Souphanouvong was not in full control of his people. Souvanna promised Unger he would investigate the incident and punish those responsible but did not visit the airfield until December 20. By that time, the prime minister deemed it more important to reunite rather than discipline the neutralist forces.[84]

Despite the C–123 shootdown, Souvanna put in for more supplies. On the day the aircraft was lost, he presented Unger with a new and larger shopping list that, in effect, called on the United States to completely resupply and outfit the neutralist forces. It included 1.7 million rounds of small-arms ammunition, eleven thousand artillery shells, five thousand bazooka shells, and over thirty-four thousand gallons of gasoline. Unger realized this exorbitant request would have to be cut back—he was not about to open the door to the MAP warehouse. However, he believed it was in America's interest to keep Kong Le strong enough to deter a communist takeover of the Plain of Jars and sought authority from Washington to make small-scale deliveries of carbine and rifle ammunition.[85]

William P. Bundy, ASD/ISA, was wary of giving Unger this prerogative because his messages often referred to the neutralists "sharing" (admittedly under pressure) their supplies with the Pathet Lao. Bundy thought that Kong Le should pledge to distribute such supplies solely to his forces. Bundy also questioned including munitions in this assistance.[86]

On December 4, State gave Unger the authority he wanted with several strings attached. As Bundy suggested, Kong Le would have to promise to confine the aid to his forty-five hundred troops. If trouble ensued between the neutralist factions, the embassy was to ensure that the ammunition was kept out of Pathet Lao hands. (The State Department assumed doling out small amounts of carbine ammunition at a time would satisfy this stipulation.) Unger was also to obtain from Souvanna his written request for continued MAP support for a FAR of forty-eight thousand men. The prime minister had said in the past he wished to prolong military assistance, and this letter made it official. Later, the AID requirements office was told to prepare recommendations for the neutralists as well as the FAR.[87]

At this point, the Russians reentered the picture. Six Il–14 Crate transports flew into Wattay on December 1, about two months earlier than promised. On the second, two An–2 Colt biplanes and an Mi–4 Hound helicopter arrived. The Soviets announced that the aircraft would

83. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 823, Nov 29, 1962.
84. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 823, 824, Nov 29, 1962, 906, Dec 20, 1962.
85. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 812, Nov 27, 1962. Souvanna showed Unger an agreement signed by himself, Souphanouvong, and Ngon Sananikone providing for a unified thirty thousand-man army composed of equal contingents from the three factions. A tripartite general staff would be formed to select the three contingents and oversee the demobilization of the remainder. There would also be an integrated police force of six thousand, with two thousand from each group. With the C–123 loss foremost in his mind, Unger doubted if the Pathet Lao could be trusted to fulfill the pact in good faith. Souvanna, however, was confident he could hold the Pathet Lao to the bargain. [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 816, Nov 27, 1962.]
86. Ltr, William P. Bundy, Dep ASD/ISA, to U. Alexis Johnson, Dep Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Nov 28, 1962.
87. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 595, Dec 4, 1962, SECDEF/SECSTATE/AID to AmEmb Vientiane, 639, Dec 28, 1962.

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be repainted with Laotian markings and, except for the pilot transition program, they would exert no operational control over them. The Russians turned over the newer, longer range Il–14s to the North Vietnamese, who used them to supply Pathet Lao/NVA troops located along the panhandle adjacent to the border with North and South Vietnam.[88]

By January 1963, Souvanna was asking for larger shipments to Kong Le's forces, prompting a visit to the Plain of Jars by high-ranking U.S. officials. Led by Roger Hilsman of the State Department, the group also included special presidential advisor Michael V. Forrestal and Ambassador Unger, as well as other country team members. In a strange turn of events so characteristic of Laos, the group made the trip in a Russian transport flown by a Soviet crew. Meeting with these visitors on January 11, Kong Le made it clear he still backed the policies of Souvanna. He underlined the need for rice, clothing, gasoline, and communication equipment. He specifically mentioned a fifty-kilowatt transmitter so his radio station could operate unhindered by the Pathet Lao. Convinced that Kong Le sincerely desired to work with the United States, Unger, Hilsman, and Forrestal recommended that Washington extend him support. Admiral Felt added his endorsement but (perhaps remembering Souvanna's enormous request in November) hoped the Military Assistance Program "would not be used as a grab bag." On January 14, President Kennedy decided that Kong Le's requests should be filled, as long as they were within reason and in line with the U.S. policy to support Souvanna.[89]

Afterwards, Admiral Felt expressed reservations about the wisdom of supporting Kong Le, saying it might be detrimental to Phoumi and the FAR. Washington stood firm, however; CINCPAC was to furnish whatever supplies Unger and the country team determined were needed. Felt was to consider Kong Le's and Phoumi's troops one and the same. By the end of February, Air America (under ICC supervision) was making regular deliveries once more to the Plain of Jars.[90]

Surprisingly, Phoumi agreed to help Kong Le as well. Several of the items Souvanna and Kong Le asked for came from stocks held by Phoumi. In truth, Souvanna later told Ambassador Unger that he and Phoumi had come to an understanding on a joint defense plan for the Plain of Jars should conditions deteriorate into open warfare. Even so, Phoumi's interpretation did not envision the FAR entering the plain but waiting for the neutralists to abandon their positions and join them. At a meeting of the general staff, Phoumi admitted that this strategy would guarantee the loss of the area, yet it was necessary if the conservatives were to avoid being accused of renewing the war.[91]

Souvanna Phouma's troika government never got off to a good start because the Pathet Lao, from the beginning, repeated their tactics of the late 1950s. They rejected any meaningful steps toward reunification of the country and, stiffened by the North Vietnamese, kept their zone intact and free from outside influence or inspection. This enabled them to thoroughly organize and control their territory, while seeking to expand communist influence through propaganda, infiltration, pressure, and bribery. Their immediate objective was Kong Le's troops on the Plain of Jars. They hoped to weaken, divide, and eventually destroy this force, while simultaneously building up the "progressive" or Deuanist (Deuan Sunnalath's) faction. At the proper moment, this splinter group would be proclaimed the only "true neutralists."[92]

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88. Dommen, p 244; *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 50–62, Dec 14, 1962, p 11.
89. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 995, Jan 11, 1963, CINCPAC to JCS, 141009Z Jan 63, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 694, Jan 14, 1963.
90. Msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, 091910Z Feb 63, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 839, Feb 21, 1963, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1228, Feb 28, 1963.
91. Hist, CINCPAC, 1963, p 167; FOV Rprt 6511, [redacted] Comments of General Phoumi Nosavan on Cooperation with the Neutralists, Mar 1, 1963.
92. Msgs, AmEmb to SECSTATE, 1311, Mar 21, 1963, 1453, Apr 14, 1963.

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The Decline of Phoumi

(U) Colonel Ketsana, the neutralist commander on the Plain of Jars, stood in the way of this scenario. A former FAR officer, Ketsana was outspoken in his opposition to the communists and staunchly resisted their efforts to subvert his troops. Through his newspaper connections, he consistently attacked the NLHX and the Deuanists. On February 12, 1963 (the evening following the departure of the king and Souvanna on a tour of the nations that signed the Geneva accords), Ketsana was assassinated. While the assailants were never found, money for the murder was rumored to have been supplied by Quinim Pholsena, the leftist foreign minister.[93]

(U) Kong Le and Ketsana's supporters swore revenge. On April 1, the king and Souvanna hosted a diplomatic reception in Vientiane after their tour abroad. Returning home from these festivities, Quinim was suddenly gunned down by a soldier guarding the front entrance to his house. Ironically, the murder weapon was a Russian-made machinegun.[94]

(U) Quinim's death impelled the Pathet Lao to action. Minor skirmishes had taken place between Kong Le's troops and the Deuanists; but on the night of April 3/4, several mortar and artillery rounds fell on Xieng Khouangville, killing twenty civilians. Souvanna protested to his brother, but Souphanouvong argued the fighting had been started by Kong Le. Despite Ambassador Unger's urging that he take the case to the International Control Commission, Souvanna demurred. By April 8, Kong Le's men were forced to withdraw from Xieng Khouangville, Khangkhai, and Ban Ban. Souvanna now requested that the ICC send a team to the Plain of Jars to help preserve the cease-fire. Souphanouvong resisted this action, contending that the fighting was just an internal dispute between forces loyal to Kong Le and those loyal to Deuan. Reports that the Deuanists were actually Pathet Lao were not true, he added; but within hours of the prime minister's proposal to the ICC, Souphanouvong slipped out of Vientiane for Khangkhai. He claimed, as Phoumi had done two years before, that security was inadequate. This move (soon matched by the departure of other Pathet Lao) meant the communists would no longer participate in the Government of National Union. Moreover, it signaled their resolve to press the fighting and to thwart reunion of the country.[95]

(U) The Pathet Lao attacks on the neutralists pushed Souvanna and Kong Le closer to the United States and to Phoumi Nosavan, a somewhat unlikely ally. For the past few months, Phoumi had been watching the turmoil in Vientiane and the Plain of Jars from his headquarters in Savannakhet. During this period, he was to have demobilized his weakest units. Instead, he enlarged his forces to nearly fifty thousand men and spent considerable time waging a quiet campaign to entice the neutralists into the "FAR fold." When the fighting on the plain flared, Phoumi airlifted food, medical supplies, weapons, and ammunition to Kong Le and offered even more help. For the time being at least, Souvanna preferred the United States. On April 14, he tendered Unger another want list for vehicles, signal equipment, weapons, and ammunition. Spurred by the war on the plain, Felt directed Tucker to quickly satisfy Souvanna's needs from the materiél he controlled. Much of this equipment (22,574 pounds) was flown into the Plain of Jars by the RLAF's six C–47s during April 21–26.[96]

(U) Secretary Rusk and Admiral Felt heard of the happenings on the Plain of Jars while attending a SEATO conference in Paris. Rusk clearly saw the North Vietnamese behind these latest Pathet Lao attempts to wreck the 1962 Geneva accords. He urged Washington to begin "serious contingency planning aimed at a clear warning to Hanoi that continued military action in Laos would lead to direct action against North Vietnam." The action the secretary had in mind did not involve ground troops—only heavy use of air power. In his view, "we can shoot

93. [redacted] *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 7–63 [on microfilm, date illegible].
94. [redacted] Dommen, pp 245–46.
95. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1394, Apr 6, 1963, 1100, 1401, Apr 8, 1963, 1496, Apr 20, 1963.
96. [redacted] Msg, CHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 130430Z Apr 63.

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the Viet Minh from the air and sea at less cost to us and maximum cost to them." Taking his cue from Rusk, Admiral Felt instructed his staff to ascertain how soon certain JTF 116 units could deploy to Udorn. He further asked CINCPACAF how long it would take to send a squadron of F–100s to Takhli, if ordered to do so on short notice. General O'Donnell quickly replied that his aircraft could be in place twelve hours after receiving the order to take off. O'Donnell also suggested sending a flight of four to six B–57 Canberras to bases in Thailand, since CINCPAC OPlan 32–63 provided for a tactical bomb squadron if needed.[97]

No immediate action was taken to activate these forces; but by April 20, Washington decided certain military moves had to be made to prove its intent to stabilize the current crisis. The Joint Chiefs ordered Felt to shift a carrier task group (TG) and a Marine BLT into waters adjacent to South Vietnam south of the 17th parallel. The carriers would be told to change course for the Gulf of Tonkin if a demonstration of U.S. strength against North Vietnam proved necessary. No publicity was to be given the movement.[98]

CINCPAC at once directed TG 77.5 (USS *Ticonderoga* attack carrier strike group) to sail from Subic Bay to a position east of South Vietnam and start normal flight operations. The USS *Princeton* amphibious ready group (TG 76.5) would position itself in the same area, but south of TG 77.5. These groups reached their destinations by April 24 and were subsequently joined by SEATO naval forces (including the USS *Yorktown*) conducting Exercise Sea Serpent. They stayed on station until the end of the month, serving their purpose of "attracting the attention" of Moscow, Peking, and Hanoi. By May 3, the units returned to normal operations.[99]

Meantime, the Joint Chiefs were staffing Secretary Rusk's suggestion to begin contingency planning aimed at North Vietnam. On April 25, they sent several alternative courses of action to Secretary McNamara for review and forwarding to Rusk and President Kennedy. The choices fell into three categories. The first were possible actions that would not violate North Vietnam's sovereignty but were indications of U.S. intent. The second category included possible actions violating North Vietnam's sovereignty but without physical hostile intent. The final category were possible actions with hostile intent.[100]

The first category stressed a show of force. Selected USAF units would be flown into Thailand while the *Ticonderoga* and *Princeton* remained on station. With the Air Force units standing alert, the naval forces would conduct extensive air maneuvers from below the 17th parallel to the northern reaches of the Gulf of Tonkin. In no case would aircraft approach closer than twelve miles off the coast of North Vietnam or communist China. The JCS likewise recommended the Marines conduct an amphibious exercise with the chance of a landing into the northern part of South Vietnam between Hue and the Demilitarized Zone.[101]

Category II accented air power. Overflights and "air demonstrations" such as sonic booms, leaflet drops, harassing, and buzzing were listed as options. The Joint Chiefs deemed this an ideal time to reinstitute high-level and low-level reconnaissance flights, not only of Laos and North Vietnam, but of Hainan Island and the southern fringes of the Chinese mainland as well. In addition, U.S. naval forces might intercept and stop North Vietnamese shipping.[102]

Category III was aimed solely at North Vietnam, for implementation as a last resort. The Navy would blockade Haiphong harbor and other ports, either by sinking old ships and

97. Msgs, AmEmb Paris to SECSTATE, SECTO, 17, Apr 9, 1963, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 815, Apr 14, 1963, CINCPAC to CHJUSMAGTHAI, 210038Z Apr 63; rprt, Rqmts Div/USAID, Utilization of RLGAF and RLAF Aircrft, in DOD IR 1 856 0011 63, Apr 26, 1963.
98. Msg, JCS to SECSTATE, CINCPAC, 9565, Apr 20, 1963.
99. Hist, CINCPAC, 1963, p 175.
100. JCSM–330–63, Military Options to Stabilize Situation in Laos, Apr 25, 1963.
101. *Ibid.*
102. *Ibid.*

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barges or dropping aerial mines. As a parallel operation, shipping might be boarded, seized, or destroyed. Finally, the Air Force would be permitted to bomb selected targets. These would be away from population centers to avoid civilian casualties. Dong Hoi airfield would be given top priority, since most of the Pathet Lao's aerial logistic support came from there. Relatively isolated, this airfield was surfaced with fifty-six hundred feet of steel matting that could be easily potholed but, as the JCS admitted, just as easily repaired by coolie labor. Following Dong Hoi, the numerous bridges leading from Vinh into Laos and other key lines of communication targets were proposed. Vinh also contained an eighty-five thousand-barrel POL storage area located five miles inland, clear of the town and an early warning radar. The Thai Nguyen iron and steel combine outside Hanoi, including the dam that supplied the mill with water, was a prime industrial target put forward by the Joint Chiefs.[103]

(S) The chiefs believed that enemy reactions to Category I actions would no doubt unleash the usual communist propaganda barrage, diplomatic notes, and Chinese "warnings" against further "provocations." Actions in the second category would elicit shriller cries and a possible offer by China to North Vietnam of air defense forces. The Chinese would probably alert certain military units as well. Since Category III options were overt acts of war, it was conceivable the Chinese would enter with ground forces as they had done in Korea. Retaliatory strikes against airfields in Laos and South Vietnam were a distinct possibility.[104] Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the JCS evaluation of enemy reactions to Category III was its ignoring any possible retaliation by North Vietnam. All its calculations were based on Chinese responses.

(S) McNamara dispatched the chiefs' plan to the State Department for coordination and comment, and two months passed before a joint State/Defense paper was presented to President Kennedy. Meanwhile, Averell Harriman was sent to Moscow to secure Soviet help in withdrawing the North Vietnamese. Foreign Minister Gromyko was not amenable, however, characterizing as absurd and unfounded U.S. claims that the North Vietnamese were in Laos. He charged the United States with maintaining "scores" of military personnel as civilians, adding that not everyone agreed with the American definition of "civilian." Harriman's rebuttal that his government had no military personnel in Laos except bona fide attachés was met with cold silence. From his "sticky" meeting with Gromyko (and later with Khrushchev), Harriman concluded that the Soviets would offer little help in securing North Vietnamese withdrawal.[105]

(S) Back in Laos, Kong Le was preparing for a May 16 counterattack to retake positions lost during the April assaults by the Pathet Lao. His plan, worked out with Vang Pao and Phoumi, called for simultaneous moves by the FAR, Meo, and neutralists against Xieng Khouangville and Nong Pet and for harassing actions against Khangkhai and Ban Ban. In the country team's judgment, this plan had slight chance for success because it demanded close coordination—a military quality notoriously lacking in the Laotians. Eventually, the government forces could wind up unable to handle any objective satisfactorily. An enemy counterattack might sweep them right off the Plain of Jars. The Americans were strongly supported in their evaluation by Gen. Robert A. Lancrenon, the new commander of the French Military Mission.[106]

(S) The State Department strongly opposed the May 16 plan. Averell Harriman immediately cabled Unger to avert any "reckless or foolish provocation" by Kong Le. Harriman had little confidence in the latter's military judgment, especially in operations carried out in collaboration with Phoumi. Nevertheless, the ambassador was to maintain the neutralists on the Plain of Jars

103. (S) *Ibid*; encl B to *ibid*.
104. (S) Hist, CINCPAC, 1963, Encl C.
105. (S) Memo of Conversation, Under SECSTATE for Political Affairs W. Averell Harriman with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Apr 26, 1963; msg, AmEmb Moscow to SECSTATE, 2756, Apr 26, 1963.
106. (S) *CIA Weekly Summary*, May 10, 1963; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1674, May 13, 1963, 1679, May 14, 1964.

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in strong defensive positions, so the only way the enemy could dislodge them would be through an "overt and flagrant attack." In other words, all offensive actions, even if designed to recover former government-held positions, were to be strongly discouraged. The onus for renewed hostilities must be placed squarely on the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. The administration recognized and accepted that the North Vietnamese would keep some military presence in Laos, not only as cadre for the Pathet Lao, but to secure the Ho Chi Minh Trail infiltration route into South Vietnam. However, if they broke the Geneva accords in such a way as to force U.S. intervention, Harriman wanted to make sure Washington had all the international political support it could get.[107]

Harriman had little cause to worry. The monsoon rains began to fall and the Pathet Lao/NVA gained advanced knowledge of Kong Le's plan. On May 15, they fired over twenty 85-mm artillery shells into the mile-long area that lay between the dirt airstrip at Muong Phan and Kong Le's headquarters. After a day's rest, enemy gunners resumed the shelling and did not let up until the ICC team landed on the plain. Things were calm for two weeks but, once the team withdrew, the sporadic artillery barrages started anew, with as many as one thousand rounds falling on May 31.[108]

The precarious military posture of the Royal Laotian government forces on the Plain of Jars sparked a reexamination of U.S. military policy by Ambassador Unger on May 18. Unger noted that the United States, two years earlier, had gone all out to strengthen Phoumi's military forces so that he could put down the communist threat and unify the country under a pro-Western conservative government. Convinced this course would not work, the Kennedy administration switched support to Souvanna and later assisted in reassembling the Geneva conference and establishing a Government of National Union. It thought these actions might resolve the contest among the three factions in Laos in the political rather than the military arena. However, it was now clear that neither the Pathet Lao nor North Vietnamese would allow unification of the country, except in their own terms, nor would the Pathet Lao participate in the government. At this stage, Unger did not rule out a large-scale communist military assault; but he supposed the enemy would prefer "nibbling" at RLG positions, particularly on the Plain of Jars. Unger commented that FAR and Meo units had taken up positions on the fringes of the plain to shore up the neutralists and prevent nibbling.[109]

In view of these events—especially Washington's recent approval of Souvanna's large arms requests—Unger was not sure what kind of armed forces the administration envisioned. For example, should Laos have an army sufficiently large and well trained to hold its own against Pathet Lao troops and their NVA cadres, or would it be better to settle for an army that could serve "primarily as a tripwire or plate glass window?" Considering the past poor performance of the Laotians and the fact that the MAAG could no longer operate in Laos, Unger saw the tripwire arrangement as the only practical solution.[110]

Responding to the ambassador's views, the State Department was in basic agreement, but the response was somewhat confusing and contradictory. State wanted a Laotian army that "could hold out long enough to focus international attention on the situation and crystallize the elements out of which we must make decisions as to what actions to take." It knew the available courses of action would sharply narrow should the government force collapse without much of a fight. Consequently, the Laotian Army should be strong enough to resist nibbling, but State did not want to build up these forces beyond their present size nor give them new equipment.

107. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1104, May 16, 1963; Hilsman, p 152.
108. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1690, May 15, 1963, 1717, May 18, 1963, 1844, Jun 2, 1963.
109. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1719, May 18, 1963.
110. *Ibid.*

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Only wornout items would be replaced. On the other hand, the department hinted it would look with favor upon embassy suggestions that bombs be provided the T–6s or U.S. advisors reintroduced at military region level. Then, apparently forgetting the events leading to Phoumi's loss of Nam Tha, Unger was told he should back efforts to extend government control into areas not yet firmly occupied by the Pathet Lao or where the enemy was weak. State seemed to have straightforward answers only to questions dealing with committing U.S. troops—for the present, U.S. troops would not be sent to Laos. However, concerning Laotian morale, "Regrettably, we have nothing new to offer on this perennial sixty-four dollar question."[111]

111. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1136, May 24, 1963.

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Chapter IV

Air Power Backs Up the New U.S. Strategy (U)

(U) Although Washington ruled out sending troops to Laos early in 1963, the White House in May asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to propose alternate, less drastic steps.[1] On June 19, the Joint Chiefs gave President Kennedy a three-phase plan of gradually escalating measures. The first phase, which was approved immediately and became National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 256, called for military and political actions aimed at building up noncommunist strength. These included an increase in military assistance, intelligence collection, and aerial resupply to Kong Le, the tribal elements, and FAR outposts in Pathet Lao territory. The second phase, approved by the President for further planning but not for implementation, contained more forceful measures. Among them were resuming USAF reconnaissance over Laos, enlarging the number of American advisors, introducing a Farm Gate operation into Laos, and harassing North Vietnam from the air.[2] Kennedy vetoed the third phase, which specified direct, active U.S. intervention into that country.[3]

(U) Even as these strategic decisions were being shaped in Washington, preliminary steps were taken to stiffen the Laotian military. For some time, the State Department had studied the possibility of replacing Thao Ma's wornout T–6s with more modern T–28s. In late April, Phoumi Nosavan secured Marshal Sarit Thanarat's agreement to hand over eight of the fighters from the RTAF inventory. Phoumi hoped Ambassador Unger would go along with the transfer because of the precarious situation on the Plain of Jars. Then, too, if the fighting resumed—a shaky cease-fire had existed for three days—Phoumi wanted to arm the T–28s with two-hundred-pound bombs. Unger would not approve the switch, however. He lacked authority for such a move and believed the changeover would provoke the Pathet Lao. Nevertheless, he passed the request to Washington and approached Souvanna on the question the next week (May 6). To Unger's surprise, the prime minister granted permission, but he preferred the planes be kept at Savannakhet after delivery.[4] State then relented; Phoumi could have the T–28s strictly on a one-for-one basis for the T–6s. Furthermore, the aircraft would stay in Thailand even though title passed to the Royal Laotian Government. Only if the United States agreed there was an "extraordinary emergency" would the planes be flown into Laos. State also felt the changed situation meant that restrictions could be relaxed on bombs (but not on napalm). The ordnance could be pre-positioned at the Peppergrinder depot south of Udorn (it had been removed when the MAAG departed Laos) and brought into Laos whenever Unger deemed it necessary.[5]

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1. (U) JCS 2344/67, May 23, 1963; memo, Actg Asst SECDEF William P. Bundy to CJCS, subj: Actions to Stabilize the Situation in Laos, May 23, 1963.
2. (U) NSAM 256, Jul 30, 1963; msg, SECDEF/SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1219, Jun 22, 1963; hist, CINCPAC, 1963, p 198.
3. (U) NSAM 256, Jul 30, 1963.
4. (U) Apparently, Unger expected to be rebuffed by Souvanna and was taken aback when the prime minister approved. The ambassador felt this action signaled a change in Souvanna's thinking: "He now appears to entertain seriously the idea that PL, North Vietnamese and Chinese communists may not intend that there be serious negotiations for peace in Laos but are bent sooner or later on war and [occupying the] entire country." [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 061250Z May 63.]
5. (U) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1542, Apr 24, 1963, 061250L May 63, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 281312L May 63, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 181911L Jun 63, SECDEF/SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, Jun 24, 1963.

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The State Department now supported replacement of the T–6s for several reasons. The switch was considered legal under Article 6 of the accords because Souvanna had requested the aircraft in writing. Since replacement was on a one-for-one basis, there was no net addition to RLAF strength. Although Secretary Rusk was not overly impressed of the military utility of the planes in Laotian hands, he thought their delivery would bolster the noncommunist forces and afford new and concrete evidence of backing from Thailand and the United States. Moreover, the T–28s might force the communists to pause and consider future attacks. If hostilities started again, the planes could attack the North Vietnamese airlift as well as the enemy troops.[6]

Refresher training for six RLAF pilots (Thao Ma among them) and six mechanics began at Kokotiem on July 2. Supervised by USAF instructors, the program lasted two weeks (ten hours flight time) and eventually qualified twelve pilots and sixteen technicians. It covered aerial and air-to-surface gunnery, air-to-surface rocket attacks, and both dive and skip bombing. Each Laotian pilot received four hundred rounds of .50-caliber ammunition, sixteen practice bombs, and three salvos of 2.75-inch rockets. That same month, the program got a bonus when four pilots sent to the United States for T–28 training returned ready for combat. Amid this activity, the ordnance for the planes was being stockpiled at Udorn. It included the larger 5-inch rockets and 500-pound bombs, although Souvanna wanted the latter employed solely as an extreme measure.[7]

Meanwhile, the British and French Ambassadors to Laos (Donald C. Hopson and Pierre L. Falaize) privately told Unger they viewed the T–6 replacement as escalation and surmised the Pathet Lao would see it the same way. Through the U.S. embassies in London and Paris, Secretary Rusk knew the British foreign office and the French foreign ministry did not favor the changeover either. Consequently, he amended the replacement guidelines on July 16—replacement would now be piecemeal, meaning singly and stretched out, unless military circumstances dictated otherwise. Deputy Chief of Mission Philip H. Chadbourn, Jr. (Unger was on his way to Washington) was to reemphasize to Phoumi and Thao Ma that these new aircraft were to be used only for defense and would not be sent into Laos unless there was a severe emergency.[8]

That same day (July 18), Phoumi had his "emergency." Eight hours after Rusk's cable arrived, Phoumi told Chadbourn that a large-scale Pathet Lao attack was taking place on the Plain of Jars. The previous night, Phoumi continued, neutralist Brig. Gen. Amkha Soukhavong had urgently requested his help. He was more than willing to give it; all he needed was Souvanna's formal request in writing. Once it was in hand, Phoumi intended jumping six battalions (two GMs) across Route 7 east of Ban Ban, and then launching a FAR/Meo/neutralist offensive into the Plain of Jars. He optimistically predicted it would "hurl the enemy once and for all out of the Plain of Jars." There was one catch; Phoumi needed the T–28s to attack Pathet Lao positions at Xieng Khouang, Ban Ban, along Route 7, and in the plain.[9]

Chadbourn was noncommittal. He suspected Phoumi was up to his old trick of taking actions that would provoke NVA intervention on such a scale as to augur his defeat and force the United States to come to his aid. It also seemed highly coincidental that this fighting should break out the day before the T–28 pilots concluded refresher training at Kokotiem. Chadbourn decided to call General Lancrenon of the FMM for confirmation of the fighting. After talking

6. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 081844L May 63 and 23, Jul 4, 1963, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 070110L May 63 and 1960, Jun 21, 1963.
7. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1991, Jun 26, 1962, 191512L Aug 63; draft memo, JCS to SECDEF, subj: Status of Phase I Actions to Stabilize the Situation in Laos, n.d., in Talking Paper, Pacific Div, Dir/J–3 (Ops), for SECDEF-JCS Meeting, same subj, Jul 8, 1963, Tab H.
8. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 180125Z Jul 63.
9. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 131, 138, Jul 18, 1963.

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with the French advisors attached to the neutralists, Lancrenon reported Phoumi had exaggerated and that conditions had calmed down. Still not satisfied, Chadbourn dispatched the Army attaché, Colonel Law, to the plain. Law later portrayed the enemy's artillery barrage as the heaviest of the past two months, but said no ground had been lost and the situation was now quiet. Significantly, however, Law believed that had the Pathet Lao attacked, there was no way the neutralists could have prevented them from overrunning the Plain of Jars.[10]

(S) Despite Phoumi's attempt to flimflam him, Chadbourn realized the time was ripe to replace the T–6s. Like Unger, he had formerly termed them "antiquated [but] more or less adequate to the Laotian situation." Now, Lt. Col. Robert L. F. Tyrrell, the new air attaché, had told him that three of the Harvards were unflyable with the other three having vital parts, such as radios, inoperable.[11] Tyrrell had also discovered through the aircraft serial numbers that the "newest" T–6 had been built in 1943. On top of this, Chadbourn could add Law's sobering comment on the neutralist position on the Plain of Jars. The deputy mission chief was somewhat relieved when he saw Souvanna the day after Phoumi's "emergency," and the prime minister formally requested the planes. On July 25, after Souvanna's written request was received, Chadbourn informed the State Department and the International Control Commission he was transferring three T–28s to the RLAF. He also held to the piecemeal delivery schedule ordered by Secretary Rusk; the remaining T–28s were not turned over until August 29. The heavier ordnance was moved to Vientiane, but the embassy kept the fuzes (and control of the weapons).[12]

(S) With the arrival of the T–28s and the pre-positioning of the heavy ordnance in Vientiane, Chadbourn felt it would serve U.S. interests to furnish an assistant air attaché for Savannakhet. This officer could report the utilization rate of the T–28s and other RLAF aircraft and coordinate supply requests with the requirements office of the embassy AID section. More important, he would remind the overeager Thao Ma of the limited defensive purpose for which the United States had approved introduction of the T–28s. Chadbourn's request was promptly confirmed and the officer arrived on August 9.[13]

(S) Paralleling the T–28 substitution was an agreement to deliver more transports to the RLG, an action forced upon the Americans because of a similar no-strings-attached gift by the Russians in December 1962. In mid-January, Souvanna suggested the United States make such a donation rather than expanding Air America's inventory. Ambassador Unger could scarcely refuse since it would show the United States, in contrast to the Soviet Union, unwilling to cooperate; but Unger recommended just a token gift of one C–46 and one liaison aircraft. These planes would be repainted in Laotian markings and given to the government's new transport arm, the Royal Laotian Government Air Force (RLGAF).[14] They could resupply the Meo and, being RLG owned and operated, might stand less chance of being shot down.[15]

(S) Admiral Felt opposed any plan giving Souvanna more than the token aircraft the ambassador proposed, for the prince had shown a penchant for upping his requests. If the United

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10. (S) See note above.
11. (S) At this time, the RLAF had seven C–47s, eighteen H–34 helicopters (operated under contract by Air America), three U–6s, four O–1s, and the six "junk" T–6s. Personnel included eleven C–47, ten T–6, twelve T–28, and seven L–19 pilots, plus one hundred mechanics. [Background Paper, Current Status of RLAF, attached to memo, Dir/Plans, USAF, to CSAF, subj: JCS Meeting with Leonard Unger, US Ambassador to Laos, Jul 16, 1963, in JCS File RL (63) 38–9.]
12. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 202107Z Jul 63, 251145Z Jul 63, 261446L Jul 63.
13. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 251250Z Jul 63 and 299, Aug 10, 1963; memo, Henry L. T. Koren, Ofc/SEA Affairs, to Roger Hilsman, Asst SECSTATE for FE Affairs, subj: Meeting on Laos Plans (Jul 27, 1963), Jul 29, 1963.
14. (S) The RLGAF was built around the nucleus of Soviet gift aircraft. Its headquarters was in Vientiane, the RLAF's stayed at Savannakhet. [Capt Peter A. W. Liebchen, *MAP Aid to Laos, 1959–1972* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1973), p 30.]
15. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 523, Jan 17, 1963.

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States ultimately matched the Soviet delivery of nine transports and a helicopter, Felt believed the Pathet Lao would demand an end to Air America. The upshot would be the loss of the Meo and Kong Le forces as effective anticommunist elements. Rather than turning the aircraft over to the RLG, Felt urged the United States to control air supply operations, keep them open to ICC inspection, and publicize the humanitarian effort they represented.[16]

(S) The State Department compromised; the C–46 and liaison aircraft would be placed at RLG disposal in an on-call status. Souvanna accepted the offer yet made it clear he would not be satisfied with any arrangement save an outright grant similar to the Soviets'. A few days later, Unger was informed that the AID program would supply two more C–46s. The State Department hoped this would provide ammunition for Souvanna in arguing with the Pathet Lao that the Americans, as well as the Russians, gave unconditional help. It would also stiffen his resolve to pursue the Meo resupply effort against the demands of the communists that it cease. By the end of March, these planes were in Vientiane.[17]

(S) The addition of a MAP C–47 on April 19 raised the RLAF inventory to ten transports. Then, as part of the Phase I actions approved by President Kennedy, Secretary McNamara further augmented the RLAF's airlift assets in late July. Four more C–47s, three U–17s, and three H–34 helicopters were delivered by October, bringing C–47 strength to fourteen planes. As with past helicopter deployments, the H–34s were dispatched to Udorn. Air America continued to supply the crews, although it was agreed that, as soon as enough indigenous pilots were trained, the RLAF would take operational control.[18]

(S) Through the summer of 1963, Souvanna carried on sporadic negotiations with his brother but could not convince him to return to Vientiane. At the same time, the enemy stepped up military pressure on the Meo and other widely scattered units in Laos. The village of Ban Pha Tang was abandoned to the foe after a heavy artillery shelling. Since the communists would not accept the territorial status quo, Ambassador Unger concluded the time had come to encourage modest RLG actions that would warn the Pathet Lao not to attempt further advances. To deny them the "fruits of military salami tactics," Unger wanted more and better use of air power. Specifically, he wished T–28s to support ground elements in retaking Ban Pha Tang, driving home to the communists that "small nibbling tactics bring punishment."[19]

(S) The exuberant Thao Ma wanted T–28s to hit the logistic dump at Tchepone, hoping to shoot down a North Vietnamese transport in the process. Unger felt the RLAF should go after enemy transports but not strike this key communist position yet, because it might trigger a strong reaction.[20]

(S) On August 19, Secretary Rusk set forth guidelines for using the T–28s. If the communists accelerated their attacks, the fighters would quickly counterpunch—the enemy must realize he could no longer act with impunity. Missions were also allowed against troop concentrations in critical areas and against trucks and POL storage facilities, but for now, "deep penetrations" were not to be flown. Armament would include rockets, machineguns, bombs, and, for the first time, napalm.[21]

(S) Ambassador Unger had grave reservations about dropping napalm. From his many years in Southeast Asia, he knew the dread most ex-French colonials had for "incendejel." During the

16. (S) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 200024Z Jan 63.
17. (S) Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 706, Jan 18, 1963, 1032, Jan 19, 1963, 724, Jan 22, 1963; hist, CINCPAC, 1963, p 187.
18. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to AmEmb Bangkok, 1255, Apr 19, 1963, SECDEF to CINCPAC, 232057Z Jul 63; hist, CINCPAC, 1963, pp 185–86.
19. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 281, Aug 23, 1963.
20. (S) *Ibid.*
21. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 158, Aug 19, 1963.

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Indochina war, the French employed it for rooting out enemy bunkers and attacking fortified villages. While the Viet Minh quickly found ways to protect themselves, napalm's use continued because it could be released close to friendly positions, often within three hundred feet without danger. In addition, the flame burst lasted from one to two minutes, long enough to gain an objective before the enemy had time to react. However, the French were somewhat indiscriminate in its use, dropping nearly 3,750 tons in 1954. In the end, it became a symbol in Southeast Asia of the more barbarous combat tactics employed. Unger, while agreeing to stockpile the canisters and detonators at Udorn, intended expending them only after getting Souvanna's permission and then only in case of a flagrant attack.[22]

That the T–28 pilots could dispense napalm properly was doubtful, since the USAF instructors at Kokotiem had not taught them how; and even though the Laotians could fly their new T–28s under normal, peacetime conditions, their skill and aggressiveness in combat remained questionable. The ability of the RLAF to coordinate operations with ground forces also was untested, due to the dearth of radio equipment and trained forward air guides. Still, there were some hopeful signs. Under Thao Ma's direction, an indigenous T–28 upgrading program had begun at Savannakhet. In spite of heavy rains, pilots logged fifty-two hours in the new fighter-bombers during August. Just three missions could be classified as combat, but the esprit shown by Thao Ma and his few pilots induced the embassy to ask for additional T–28s in the Military Assistance Program for fiscal year 1964.[23] Once the maintenance problems associated with this shakedown period were ironed out, Unger intended to request an RT–28 photo reconnaissance model. Interim photo coverage came from cameras installed in an RLAF C–47.[24]

By the close of October, Thao Ma had sufficient confidence in his pilots to solicit Ambassador Unger for fuzed bombs. The RLAF chief planned to crater Route 7, seeking to hamper enemy supply activities directed against guerrilla operations on the Plain of Jars. The State Department was opposed and issued new and stiffer guidelines. Henceforth, the T–28s would be confined to answering clearly aggressive enemy actions of such intensity as to justify calling on air. Cratering Route 7 or working with guerrillas was considered escalation, but State was still willing to have the T–28s intercept and down any illegal North Vietnamese supply flights. Communist artillery firing at government positions could be attacked, provided FAR or neutralist artillery could not respond. Such reprisals must be immediate, however, so the enemy understood it was punitive. In all cases, Unger was to consult with Souvanna before acting.[25]

Officials of the Defense Department believed these instructions were not only unrealistic, but slowed down the program approved by President Kennedy on July 30 (NSAM 256). Like Admiral Felt, Defense wanted Unger delegated certain authority so he would have the requisite flexibility to react instantly to any Pathet Lao threat. These views were presented at an interdepartmental meeting on October 31. State afterwards modified the ambassador's charter on the use of T–28s for defense and reprisal, allowing these aircraft to aid any RLG position under attack or support counterattacks to regain lost ground. The State Department, however, insisted Unger secure Washington's permission each time he wanted to release fuzes to the RLAF.[26]

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22. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 324, Sep 5, 1963; Col V. J. Croizat, USMC, Ret, *A Translation from the French: Lessons of the War in Indochina*, Vol 2 (RM–5271–PR, Santa Monica, 1967), p 344.

23. One of Thao Ma's associates later recounted: "I went to the same schools in France with Ma . . . we used to sleep in the same room. But after he began to fly the T–28, it was as if he did not know anyone at all, if he did not fly the T–28." [John C. Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force, 1954–1970* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1970), p 9.]

24. Msgs, USARMA Vientiane to DIA, 191225Z Aug 63, SECSTATE, 547, Oct 25, 1963; rprt, AIRA Vientiane, Semiannual FWAIS, Sep 12, 1963.

25. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 362, Oct 26, 1963.

26. Memo, Stephen A. Loftus, Actg Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to Dep ASD/ISA, subj: Interdepartmental Meeting on Laos, Oct 29, 1963; memo, Stephen A. Loftus, Actg Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to William P. Bundy, Dep

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This stance threw into sharp focus the question of T–28 control and employment. Case-by-case referral to Washington for fuze release lengthened the critical reaction time and placed decisionmaking and control of tactical operations in the hands of men halfway around the world. It also put CINCPAC and the Defense Department on the ambassador's side, previously a rare occurrence in the history of American involvement in Laos. This did not mean that Unger was suddenly a "hawk." On the contrary, while chargé d'affaires in Bangkok, he had supported Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown's efforts as country team chief to control military operations in Laos. Now, as Brown's successor, he saw his authority over day-to-day operations slipping back to Washington, with a cumbersome, time-consuming, and self-defeating chain of command taking its place.

On November 2, while the new T–28 guidelines were being drafted, the long-held Meo position at Tha Lin Noi fell to the Pathet Lao, apparently the first in a series of attacks on Meo and other government positions. On November 13, Unger again asked for advance authority under specific cases to release fuzes to the RLAF, as well as for a reprisal attack on Tha Lin Noi. He listed three categories for advance permission: missions already approved (such as immediate reprisals), defense of key points (whether FAR, neutralist, or Meo), and efforts to retake captured key positions (such as Tha Lin Noi). The targets would be limited strictly to antiaircraft or artillery batteries in the area of action, to personnel concentrations, and to convoys clearly identified as participating in ground operations in combat areas. However, State's guidelines were not relaxed, and Unger did not secure the leeway he sought.[27]

Meanwhile, the RLAF had a lot of trouble maintaining its T–28s. Unger hoped these problems would soon be resolved, but the signs were not promising. The Laotians were unable to perform satisfactory maintenance; and on several occasions, USAF Farm Gate personnel from South Vietnam were sent covertly to Savannakhet to repair the aircraft. Suddenly, two of the T–28s were lost in mid-November when young RLAF pilots attempted low-level acrobatics. Thao Ma then shifted two of the remaining planes to Vientiane for use on the Plain of Jars. The other two stayed at Savannakhet to work all of central and southern Laos. Strapped for aircraft, Thao Ma was forced to drop his T–28 training program and curtail proficiency flights. It was only a matter of time before many of the checked-out pilots would lose currency in the aircraft. To avoid this and to bring the RLAF back to its authorized inventory, Colonel Tyrrell recommended that the Thai be approached again for planes.[28]

Tyrrell's counterpart in Bangkok, Col. Roland K. McCoskrie, believed the embassy would object to the proposal. The RTAF had furnished the first six T–28s and had not yet received replacements. McCoskrie knew that Graham A. Martin, the new Ambassador to Thailand, would ask the RTAF for two T–28s, but he also knew the Thai did not like furnishing a replacement pool for Laotian aircraft. He accordingly recommended the aircraft be drawn from the Cambodian Air Force. Otherwise, a USAF Special Air Warfare Center detachment should be sent from Eglin to Udorn with six to twelve T–28s for training both RLAF and RTAF air and ground personnel. As a bonus, the T–28s could readily augment the RLAF whenever necessary. McCoskrie had broached this idea to the RTAF chief in September 1962. No mention was made in that meeting of working with the Laotians, but the discussion did include using special air warfare (SAW) personnel to help train the three Thai composite squadrons. McCoskrie saw no

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ASD/ISA, subj: Interdepartmental Meeting on Laos (31 Oct), Nov 1, 1963; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 081919L Nov 63.

27. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130344Z Nov 63.

28. Intvw, Capt Richard B. Clement and Lt Col Barry L. Bonwit, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Lt Col Drexel B. Cochran, Aug 20, 1969; msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 261035Z Nov 63; Fact Sheet, Capability of Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF), May 11, 1964, in CINCPACAF Gen Jacob E. Smart's Fact Bk II for SECDEF Mtg, May 13, 1964, Tab 7.

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reason why this could not be done for both countries and the detachment put under the air section in DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI.[29]

By December, Admiral Felt had proposed that Defense Secretary McNamara give the green light to the deployment to Udorn of four T–28s and between thirty and forty SAW personnel. Ambassador Unger had added his strong endorsement, being especially pleased with the inclusion of specialists in maintenance and armament. He trusted that the SAW personnel (known as air commandos) could deal with the "vexing and unresolved technical assistance problem." An added benefit the ambassador envisioned was the chance for continuous RLAF pilot training in association with American instructors. Working alongside the Thai would likewise remove any difficulties relating to the operation of RLAF T–28s over Thailand.[30]

On January 3, 1964, Thailand's new prime minister, Thanom Kittikachorn (Sarit had died in December), and Air Chief Marshal Dawee Chunlasap (RTG Deputy Minister of Defense) authorized the transfer of two T–28s from the RTAF. To get them, Ambassador Martin promised that the original six T–28s, as well as these two, would be replaced by similar types by June 30. Dawee hinted that the new Northrup F–5 Freedom Fighter would be acceptable, although Martin deemed it best to discourage talk of jets.[31]

To meet Meo airlift needs, Unger had persuaded the FAR to make one C–46 available daily. The FAR had also committed itself to placing two C–47s and one liaison-type aircraft at the disposal of the neutralists. However, Ambassador Unger was running into troubles with the RLG's transport fleet. In the past few months, the Laotians had been given extra transports, either through lease or grant; and more transport pilots were available. With this in mind—and as a step designed to reduce activities that might cause the United States to be charged with violating the Geneva accords—Unger had cut back on Air America operations. To induce greater utilization of the government transports, he turned aside all FAR requests for such airlift. It did not work out that way, however.[32]

Airlift operations were hamstrung by the absence of trained aerial port specialists and managers and the absence of a central organization to coordinate transport resources. Furthermore, the RLAF had tried to exercise exclusive control over some of the aircraft placed at the RLGAF's disposal by the United States. This had strained relations between Souvanna and Phoumi and resulted in a government transport effectiveness far below that of Air America. As a remedy, Unger suggested the creation of an air transport operations board composed of cargo plane owners and users. The board would screen flight requests and allocate priorities and space, generating better use of all transports and cooperation between the FAR and the neutralists. This system would be much better than the disarray that existed with attachés or AID people settling disputes by knocking heads together.[33]

Souvanna said he would go along with whatever the ambassador decided, but he seized the opportunity to vent his growing concern over Air America. The airline's connection with the past fighting and its resupply missions to the Meo interfered with his attempts to get the Pathet Lao to return to Vientiane to again participate in the national government. Souvanna did not want Air America to close down but wondered if their operations could be transferred to a new American company. Under these circumstances, Unger thought it best to withdraw Air America. Its twenty-one transports would be turned over to a new airline "unsullied by pre-Geneva connections in Laos." It would pick up most of Air America's personnel, but Unger favored maximum use of non-Americans to reduce U.S. visibility. As the Laotians gained proficiency,

29. Msg, AIRA Bangkok to SECSTATE, 151511L Nov 63.
30. Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, pp 285–86; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 161300Z Jan 64.
31. Msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1795, Jan 4, 1964.
32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 271314L Nov 63.
33. *Ibid.*

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the airline would be phased out. The new company could be targeted for Pathet Lao propaganda, but it would not be handicapped by being connected with the past fighting. The State Department authorized the air transport operations board but was lukewarm to removing Air America. That idea was eventually dropped.[34]

In December 1963, Souvanna and the Pathet Lao signed a preliminary agreement on the neutralization and demilitarization of the royal capital at Luang Prabang. This accord encountered stout opposition from Phoumi, who demanded similar concessions (such as the neutralization of Samneua and free movement within Pathet Lao territory). Backed by the North Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao refused and quickened military operations. Lak Sao and Kham Keut in central Laos fell to them in late December, and the FAR lost the Na Kay plateau on January 29, 1964.[35] All of Route 8 from Lak Sao to Nhommareth, including the Na Kay airfield, was now under Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese control. When enemy patrols were spotted less than sixteen miles from Thakhek, Colonel Law gloomily stated that little stood between them and the Mekong. In northern Laos, there were daily artillery exchanges. The long awaited-Meo/FAR drive to recapture Tha Lin Noi fizzled, and the perennial pessimistic view of FAR leadership and will to fight again appeared in embassy correspondence.[36]

In early February 1964, the U.S. Army General Staff pushed for implementation of some of the Phase II measures approved by President Kennedy. The Army wanted the American advisory role to the FAR and neutralists expanded beyond the handful of accredited attachés, and it endorsed the Air Staff position that the USAF resume reconnaissance of Laos. On February 24, the General Staff seconded Admiral Felt's proposal that the United States supply sanitized combat aircraft and American or third-country pilots to the RLAF. Their strikes on Pathet Lao concentrations and supply dumps, chiefly the logistic hub at Tchepone, could cripple communist support both in Laos and South Vietnam. The Army was sure these actions would clearly demonstrate U.S. resolve to stay in Southeast Asia. Though tabling the Army paper, the Joint Chiefs did recommend to Secretary McNamara that high-level and low-level photo reconnaissance of Laos be renewed.[37]

Even though all of the Army's paper was not accepted, a change of Southeast Asia strategy was in the offing. The new administration of Lyndon B. Johnson (following Kennedy's assassination) had finally settled in and was calling for a review of the "continued flagrant communist violations of the Geneva Accords." It was now obvious to Washington that the principal communist goal in Laos was to disrupt the operation of Souvanna's government. The United States favored the Geneva tripartite arrangement, but this goal was unattainable as long as the communists refused to cooperate politically and kept up their military pressure. Often labeled "talk-while-fighting," this strategy was adopted by the communists in Korea (and used by the North Vietnamese at Paris during 1968-72).[38]

On February 26, 1964, Secretary of State Rusk asked for Ambassador Unger's views on a proposed memo to President Johnson. In the memo, Rusk recommended expanded use of

34. *Ibid*; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 192013L Dec 63.

35. The T-28s flew forty-five sorties in the Thakhek region from January 13 to February 4, using 2.75-inch rockets and .50-caliber ammunition. Results were unknown. [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130822Z Feb 64.]

36. *CIA Weekly Review*, Jan 10, 1964; CIA Intel Study 67-14, Laos, the Divided Nation, Jan 67; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, A-224, subj: Recent Critical Developments on Laotian Military and Political Scene, Feb 19, 1964.

37. Talking Paper, USA GS, Situation in Laos, Feb 6, 1964; msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 231010Z Feb 64; Talking Paper, USA GS, Steps to Improve the Situation in Southeast Asia with Particular Reference to Laos, n.d., in JCS 2339/120, Feb 23, 1964.

38. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Paris *et al*, Feb 29, 1964, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 664, Feb 26, 1964.

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T–28s, [redacted] and sabotage against the North Vietnamese. He also suggested larger Meo units, the resumption of South Vietnamese border patrols into Laos, and high-level USAF photo reconnaissance of the country. Rusk wanted Unger to gauge Phoumi's reaction to these measures.[39] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA

Ambassador Unger's response rested on the premise that the United States intended to be bound by the Geneva accords and still wanted Laos neutral, with the main U.S. support going to Souvanna. Unger said the root problem was the Pathet Lao/NVA strategy of gradually nibbling away at government held territory. Washington could ill afford more erosion, and this included the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Yet, open American intervention would nullify Souvanna's goal of a neutral Laos removed from the East-West conflict. No doubt the prime minister shared the United States government's concern over Southeast Asia as a whole. On the other hand, he was unsympathetic to American actions in Laos being "coordinated with those regarding Thailand and South Vietnam." He concluded that if Laos ever became a battlefield, it would be hurt the most. As an old Laotian proverb noted, "When buffalo fight, only the ground suffers." Hence, Unger presumed the prince would thumb down any proposal to launch guerrillas from Laos into North Vietnam. At the same time, Phoumi would favor all these moves because his basic aim was to entangle the United States to the point of providing overt troop support.[40]

Turning to the FAR, Unger pointed out that whenever the United States contemplated stronger military actions in Laos, "we come up against the inescapable fact that friendly forces . . . are woefully weak and limited in their capabilities." He felt the Royal Army could hold its own with the Pathet Lao but could not stand up to the North Vietnamese or to Pathet Lao units that included NVA cadres. Something needed to be done to discourage the North Vietnamese from giving such support. An increase in F–100s might put them on warning, but it would do little else unless the United States was willing to intervene openly.[41] Since Washington was not prepared to do this, the one hope Unger saw was greater use of the T–28s.[42]

Unfortunately, the RLAF was small, unversed in staff work, and deficient in individual skills. The caliber of the pilots ranged widely, from relatively well qualified to that of one barely out of training. None were current in gunnery, because the air arm was still without a gunnery range inside Laos. Thao Ma had not reinstated T–28 training, although he had received two T–28s from the RTAF and his inventory was back to six. In fact, few T–28 combat missions had been flown (none in the face of enemy antiaircraft fire), and the aggressiveness of the pilots continued untested. However, when the T–28s appeared, the morale of the friendly forces did go up and enemy's went down, even though the aircraft were limited to machineguns and rockets. FAR commanders quickly grasped this phenomenon and requested strikes far in excess of RLAF capabilities.[43]

This seemed to augur well for the RLAF; but in truth, ground commanders had no real grasp of how to properly use air power. Some observers attributed this to their former French training. Whatever the reason, it was evident that strike requests gave insufficient information about location, priority, troop disposition, or enemy AA capability. The FAR was not trained in forward air guide procedures, and army leaders turned a deaf ear to suggestions in these matters. Likewise, Thao Ma could not be persuaded to assign air liaison officers to FAR units, and the

39. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, Feb 26, 1964.
40. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 927, Mar 1, 1964.
41. ASD/ISA William P. Bundy had been told (erroneously) that Rusk's memo included the introduction of U.S. ground forces, a move Bundy opposed. Bundy held that an air squadron alone would send the proper signal to Hanoi. [Memo, William P. Bundy to SECDEF, subj: Laos, Feb 28, 1964.]
42. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 927, Mar 1, 1964.
43. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 942, Mar 3, 1964; A–249, subj: Utilization of T–28 Aircraft, Mar 4, 1964.

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lack of a tactical air control net forced strike requests to labor up the military region chain of command to the RLAF. (The single exception was in MR III, where RLAF and military region headquarters were together.) Receipt and coordination of strike requests lagged to the point where the situation markedly changed before fighters took off—too often, the communists had melted back into the jungle. Finally, strike results were unknown because ground units rendered neither after action nor evaluation reports.[44]

Ambassador Unger stressed there would be no improvement in the RLAF until bombing restrictions were lifted. More important, the mandatory U.S. consultation, including Washington referral, entailed a delay that discouraged the RLAF from asking for the fuzes in expectation of being refused. Therefore, any upgrading of the strike air arm must be coupled with a loosening of the curbs imposed by Washington. As a start, a few bomb fuzes could be turned over to the Laotians on the understanding they were to be used solely for defensive purposes[45] and in consultation with the embassy. If the airmen showed "prudent and effective use" of the ordnance, it would be replenished. For a stronger punch to the strikes, Unger wanted the 500-pound bombs, but demurred on napalm since the Laotians could not deliver it properly. He also favored low-level reconnaissance but wanted all missions cleared by Souvanna through the embassy. No answer was given to the question of introducing U.S. or third-country pilots and aircraft.[46]

The ambassador underscored that, while the military measures in Rusk's memo might engender a gradual improvement in the RLG armed forces, they would not stop further gains by the Pathet Lao or seriously stem North Vietnamese support. Clearly, actions against the Ho Chi Minh Trail would merely provoke a stronger reaction from North Vietnam; and better armament, equipment, and relaxing the rules would not enable six T–28s to tip the scales in favor of the RLG. Nonetheless, Unger stressed that if President Johnson opted for expanding T–28 use, the Army attaché and the air attaché were set to assist in target selection, mission planning, and coordination. Furthermore, pilot proficiency should pick up once the SAW detachment got to Udorn.[47]

The Air Force was convinced Ambassador Unger's response did not go far enough. General LeMay held that, even if heavier ordnance were inserted, far more than a meager six T–28s were needed to interdict roads or support ground forces. He thought the time had come to use Thai, Vietnamese, and U.S. forces to augment the RLAF. The Air Force chief especially wanted to hit the major supply lines running from North Vietnam. A memo from LeMay to the other members of the Joint Chiefs was withdrawn and revised, resurfacing later as a JCS memo to Secretary McNamara. This version assigned offensive and defensive roles to the RLAF and specified giving them napalm once their pilots were trained in delivery by the SAW detachment. The chiefs wanted the first priority in interdiction to be inbound convoys, with road cratering and bridge destruction secondary. Finally, T–28 reconnaissance should not be tried; at the least, that mission should be weighed against other missions of the planes. The chiefs believed the Air Force should furnish reconnaissance in most instances.[48]

On March 5, just a week before this JCS memo was sent to him, Secretary McNamara approved the assignment of a SAW T–28 detachment to Udorn. (The Royal Laotian Government had approved the deployment on March 4.) The deployment was to be for six months or longer, depending on a later evaluation. The unit was officially designated Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing, with the nickname Water Pump. Its job was to train RLAF pilots and

44. See note above.
45. Defined as reprisals for aggressive enemy actions and for interdiction aimed at preattack enemy buildups.
46. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 942, Mar 3, 1964.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Memo, Dir/Plans, USAF, to CSAF, subj: Concept of Employment of Royal Laotian Air Force, Mar 5, 1964; JCS 2344/76–1, Mar 11, 1964.

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mechanics; maintain the Laotian planes; supplement RLAF sorties, if required; and provide experienced planners to the air attaché at Vientiane, if needed. The detachment was also to be the air nucleus if any U.S. contingency plan for Laos was activated and would assist the Thai in their up-country civic action program. Although the unit was attached to the 2d Air Division in Saigon, it would carry out the training specified by Col. Jack G. Cornett, USA, the new DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI. In reality, the unit worked for Ambassador Unger.[49]

[redacted] Water Pump's commander was Maj. Drexel B. Cochran who, like most of his men, had served earlier with Farm Gate in South Vietnam. All the detachment's thirty-eight members were volunteers, including eight pilots and four crewchiefs and one prop, one engine, and four armament specialists. The group was highly skilled in all phases of T–28 operations. As part of their early commando training and tours with Farm Gate, many pilots had learned to perform the light aircraft maintenance associated with primitive, forward operating bases. Though some Water Pump personnel spoke French, they expected to train the Laotians through Thai interpreters. They were fully aware their students would have low levels of technical training. Eight days after receiving McNamara's approval, Water Pump personnel were on their way to Udorn. At Saigon, the four disassembled T–28s were reassembled at Tan Son Nhut and ferried to Udorn by the Water Pump pilots.[50]

[redacted] Due to funding problems, it was another six weeks before the first Laotian pilot came. While waiting, Cochran and his men updated facility charts by flying to all Thai airfields that could handle T–28s. With the cooperation of the Royal Thailand Army, the much-needed gunnery range was laid out on an exposed table rock ten miles southwest of Udorn. Because no provision could be made for ground triangulation, a rudimentary method of air scoring was devised. The unit's flight surgeon began a medical civic action program for the local villages in northern Thailand, many still under communist influence or infiltration. The participation of the accompanying RTG member was spotlighted, with that of the Americans kept in the background. During this period, Cochran received several visits and inspections from Colonels Tyrrell and Cornett, Ambassadors Unger and Martin, and Maj. Gen. Joseph H. Moore, the 2d Air Division Commander. It was during one such visit that Moore reemphasized to Cochran the key role Ambassador Unger would play in Water Pump's operation.[51]

[redacted] While the detachment was preparing to accept its first Laotian students, Thao Ma and Phoumi Nosavan requested Ambassador Unger to release fuzes for one-hundred-pound bombs. Thao Ma planned a T–28 attack on a strongly entrenched Pathet Lao position outside the village of Nong Boua. Lying in a traditional FAR area, this town fell in January to the Pathet Lao after six months of steady harassment. RLG troops were currently trying to retake and clear the area, but a fortified position held up the drive. T–28 rocket runs had not reduced it, and two fighters had been hit by antiaircraft fire. The fuzes were needed to support this effort.[52]

[redacted] After Phoumi had broached the subject to Souvanna and he went along, Unger asked Washington to authorize release of the bomb fuzes. The ambassador contended that the fall of Nong Boua was another clear case of Pathet Lao nibbling that should be stopped cold. His request met State Department criteria: the target was well within a FAR area and the bombing would bring retribution for enemy aggression, while concretely demonstrating that force would be met with force. Unger did not intend to release more than the four to six fuzes needed to do the job. He would not give in to further requests unless they seemed justified. This time Washington concurred. However, before the fuzes could be turned over to Thao Ma, the three

49. [redacted] Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 052053Z Mar 64, CINCPAC to JCS, 130443Z Mar 64, CSAF to TAC, AFXOP 98476, Mar 5, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.
50. [redacted] Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.
51. [redacted] *Ibid.*
52. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 200854Z Mar 64.

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sides agreed to a tripartite meeting on the Plain of Jars. A cease-fire was again declared and the T–28s were relegated to flying reconnaissance.[53] Notwithstanding, a significant and fundamental change in American policy toward Laos had occurred—Washington was no longer willing to overlook Pathet Lao attacks on government positions. Bomb fuzes would be furnished if friendly forces were counterattacking to regain lost ground or the T–28s were flying a reprisal mission. Employment of T–28s as bombers was no longer deemed escalation.

The Plain of Jars meeting (April 18) ended in sharp disagreement when the Pathet Lao insisted on the demilitarization and neutralization of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. After flying back to Vientiane, a disappointed Souvanna Phouma decided to resign as prime minister. King Savang Vatthana, however, said he would not act on the resignation until the next day. That night, Siho Lamphouthacoul's DNC troops closed Wattay Airfield and set up numerous checkpoints in Vientiane and at all entrances to the capital.[54] By eight in the morning on April 19, the "Revolutionary Committee of the National Army" (about seventy to seventy-five FAR officers) had arrested Souvanna and General Amkha and taken over the government. For several months, there had been many proposals, even threats, by the rightists to do away with the Government of National Union. Feeling that Souvanna had not put enough pressure on the ICC to investigate Pathet Lao nibbling, the Laotian military was fed up with flagrant enemy violations of the Geneva accords, a sentiment felt by many anticommunist Laotians. The commander of Military Region V, Kouprasith Abhay, was announced as the committee's head with Siho as his deputy. Thao Ma was also named an assistant and Bounleuth Sanichan an "advisor." The T–28 force was reported on alert, the pilots sleeping in tents beside their planes. Kong Le, who had been slowly losing power to Amkha Soukhavong, was rumored to be ready to throw in his lot with the coup leaders.[55]

At the time, Ambassador Unger was meeting in Saigon with Secretary Rusk; the Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge; and the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, William P. Bundy.[56] Accompanied by Bundy, Unger flew back to Vientiane that afternoon. In no uncertain terms, he told Kouprasith and Siho that the United States supported Souvanna, the Government of National Union, and the 1962 Geneva accords. He advised them to release Souvanna, Amkha, and other officials. A public announcement should follow in which the generals would say they acted only because Souvanna's intention to resign had caused them concern for the nation's security. Now that the Laotian ship of state was back on course, Unger continued, the question of Souvanna's resignation would be handled in a constitutional manner. Kouprasith and Siho, taken aback by Unger's strong remarks, could merely nod their agreement. Unger noted that throughout the conversation the two Laotian generals "gave the impression of badly frightened little boys who now realize they have climbed far out on the limb and are uncertain how to proceed." Bundy was more graphic; it appeared to him that they had "stepped in it" and were now hoping to save face.[57]

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53. *Ibid*; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 773, Mar 20, 1964.

54. By 1964, the Directorate of National Coordination (DNC) resembled a combined military intelligence, CIA, FBI, immigration service, and civil police organization. It was run by Phoumi through Siho to maintain the former's political power and position. Included in the DNC were three paratroop battalions called border security battalions-actually Phoumi's private army. Total strength was sixty-five hundred men. [Msg, USARMA Vientiane to DA, 160550Z Apr 64.]

55. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 190222Z Apr 64, ARMA Vientiane to DA, 190530Z Apr 64, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, date blurred.

56. President Johnson had shifted Bundy from his previous post of Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs.

57. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 191658Z Apr 64, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, A–961, subj: Conversation between Assistant Secretary Bundy and Foreign Minister Thanat in Regard to Laotian Situation, Apr 24, 1964.

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[redacted]

Bundy and Unger then went to see Phoumi, who professed disgust at what Kouprasith and Siho had done, and heaped most of the blame on the latter. He agreed to see the two generals and restore the government to what it was before the coup. Apparently, Phoumi was not an instigator of the plot, although he was probably not unhappy about it. His dislike for the Geneva accords was well known and he had often expressed his preference for the MAAG's return. Thus, the coup gave Phoumi the chance to sit back and not take the blame, or to cash in if it turned to his liking. Since a majority of the FAR's senior commanders still backed him, Phoumi could probably have stepped in if Souvanna had quit. Moreover, if the prime minister's resignation had prompted a Pathet Lao offensive, Phoumi believed his accession to power would have forced the blessing of the U.S., British, and French governments.[58]

Nevertheless, Phoumi kept his promise—Souvanna, Amkha, and other neutralists were released. The next day, Souvanna flew to Luang Prabang with Phoumi and Assembly President Oun Sananikone, who was a relative of Kouprasith. The coalition government was soon back in business but not before Souvanna agreed to reorganize the armed forces into a single group. He also promised to appoint successors to the assassinated Quinim and the absent Pathet Lao members of the government.[59]

With the prime minister moving further away from their ideological position, the Pathet Lao decided to deploy more forces into the Plain of Jars. Two significant events simplified their takeover of the area. Shortly after the April 19 coup, while the revolutionary committee controlled the radios of Vientiane, an order went out to GM 17 to move to the capital. Two infantry battalions of this force were defending a row of small but strategic hills cutting across the northern part of the plain. This line, never of real strength, depth, or firepower, was further weakened. Almost simultaneously with the withdrawal order, the Pathet Lao began an artillery shelling of the area. It was never determined if this was a repetition of the harassing fire that had been going on for several months or was for the purpose of preparing an assault. Regardless, GM 17 withdrew and the ground was immediately occupied by the enemy. When Maj. Gen. Khamkong Vongnarath, commander of Military Region II, learned of the withdrawal order, he countermanded it. By this time, however, GM 17 was in no mood to fight, its discipline having faded away. This gave the communists control of Phou San, a strategic hill overlooking Route 7. From this vantage point, they could use their artillery to interdict any supplies moving up to Kong Le's headquarters at Muong Phan.[60]

The second event was also tied to the April 19 coup. When Lt. Col. Cheng Saignavong, the commander of Kong Le's 4th Paratroop Battalion, learned of the coup and subsequent arrest of Souvanna and Amkha, he contacted the Pathet Lao. Although Cheng did not go over to the communists, his men began to openly collaborate with them. This was an ominous sign since Cheng controlled the town of Tha Thom, the southern anchor of Kong Le's defense line. His soldiers also occupied the dominant terrain in the Plain of Jars. As the days went by, a subtle tug-of-war evolved between Kong Le and the Pathet Lao for Cheng's loyalty. When Cheng discovered the military reorganization that Souvanna had agreed to in Vientiane, he grew more rebellious. On the night of May 13/14, he and Kong Le's armor commander, Lt. Col. Soulideth Rattanakone, threatened a coup against Kong Le. Souvanna at once flew to the plain to smooth things over but met with an ultimatum—reorganize the neutralist forces and restructure the command to weed out the worthless, weak, and right-leaning officers. Playing for time, Souvanna

58. [redacted] See note above; msg, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, *et al*, 3530, May 6, 1964.
59. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 200419Z Apr 64, SECSTATE to AmEmb Paris, 1614, Apr 21, 1964.
60. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 281642Z Apr 64, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX–188, Apr 30, 1964, 150620Z May 64, 170530Z May 64, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, *et al*, 10278, Jun 11, 1964; *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 22–64, May 29, 1964.

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agreed. Thus, while the neutralists were torn between recrimination and distrust, the communists attacked on May 16. Significantly, Cheng fought the invaders but was killed in action. Soulideth, however, refused to obey Kong Le's orders. Plans called for his Russian-built PT–76 tanks to counterattack the northern flank of the penetration. Instead they remained in their tank park, content to lob a few rounds in the general direction of the Pathet Lao advance.[61]

Few neutralists units gave a good account of themselves; most fled in panic to the western fringe of the Plain of Jars. The huge store of supplies, painstakingly stockpiled for the upcoming rainy season, was largely abandoned. The neutralists now regrouped at Muong Soui, a small village straddling Route 7 at the plain's western edge. If it were lost, the neutralist army might well be finished.[62]

As soon as he learned of the neutralist retreat, Ambassador Unger requested Souvanna's permission to fuze the RLAF's one-hundred-pound bombs. Since one of Water Pump's missions was to augment the RLAF in an emergency, Unger also asked his consent to fly the American pilots in Laotian-marked T–28s. Seeing the situation on the plain was grave, Souvanna accepted both proposals, but said he wished target selection done jointly by Amkha and Thao Ma. Unger then instructed Cochran (through Tyrrell) to start sheep-dipping his flyers. If the first air strikes were successful, Unger intended to ask Souvanna to allow fuzing of the five-hundred-pound bombs stored at Udorn (Washington had given Unger permission that day to introduce and use these larger bombs). Eagerly anticipating combat, the air commandos spent the entire night of May 17/18 sanitizing their T–28s, painting on Laotian markings and changing the tail numbers.[63]

Secretary Rusk threw cold water on the use of USAF pilots, citing excessive risks. If it desired, the embassy could turn over Water Pump's T–28s to the RLAF, and the Joint Chiefs had alerted CINCPAC to this possibility. However, in view of the combat experience of the Laotian pilots, Rusk thought it better for the Thai to furnish the extra pilots. The embassy in Bangkok was told to ask the Royal Thailand Government for them and for approval to fly out of Udorn. Ambassador Unger was also to secure Souvanna's assent to a series of low-level U.S. jet reconnaissance missions covering the Paksane-Tha Thom road and key areas in the Plain of Jars.[64]

Souvanna opposed the jet reconnaissance flights on the grounds they would be exploited by the communists as direct U.S. intervention and would seriously undermine behind-the-scenes diplomatic actions to have the Pathet Lao return to their previous positions. Unger supported Souvanna and injected a new twist: Jet reconnaissance flights, unaccompanied by air strikes, would depress rather than boost the morale of government troops. He hinted Souvanna might approve the reconnaissance flights (despite his past statements) if they were accompanied by Thai or U.S. air strikes. The ambassador also implied Washington was fooling itself if it did not recognize that reconnaissance missions would inevitably suffer the same political/propaganda repercussions as offensive air attacks but would not achieve any tactical success. Finally, Unger failed to understand why his superiors refused to allow American pilots in T–28s while endorsing reconnaissance flights using U.S. pilots and planes. Either way entailed risk—and the military value of the T–28s far outweighed the risk.[65]

While Washington pondered Unger's communique, the ambassador decided to hand over Water Pump's four T–28s to the RLAF. Bombs could not be loaded at Udorn, since prior

61. *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 22–64, May 29, 1964; msg, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, *et al*, 10278, Jun 11, 1964; Talking Paper, JCS, Laos, May 17, 1964; *CIA Intelligence Summary* 67–14, Jan 67.
62. *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 22–64, May 29, 1964.
63. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1329, May 17, 1964; SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1007, May 17, 1964; JCS to CINCPAC, 6345, May 17, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.
64. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, *et al*, May 17, 1964.
65. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 180505Z May 64.

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clearances allowing RLAF planes to land in Thailand applied solely to maintenance flights. Ambassador Martin suggested an Air America C–47 be sent to Udorn to pick up the bombs and hoists, returning them to Wattay where the ordnance would be loaded. Unger concurred and, to speed the arming, sanctioned the move of five USAF technicians to Wattay. Because this violated the Geneva accords, the five were given civilian identification and thoroughly briefed on the need to keep that cover.[66]

On May 18, Thao Ma and his flyers arrived at Udorn to take over the four T–28s, much to the disappointment of the USAF air commandos who had anticipated combat in Laos. That afternoon, the RLAF T–28s flew four missions of three aircraft against enemy positions on the Plain of Jars. Twenty-four one-hundred-pound and twelve five-hundred-pound bombs were dropped, mostly on the supplies and material left behind by Kong Le's soldiers. In spite of the air attaché's suggestion that the T–28s strafe after each bombing run, only one pass was made on each target.[67]

Late that evening, a transpacific telephone conference was held between high-ranking administration officials and Ambassador Unger. The Washington participants included Bundy and Sullivan of the State Department; John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA; William E. Colby, CIA; and Brig. Gen. Lucius D. Clay, Jr., Dir/J-3 (Ops), JCS. While it was late evening in Vientiane, it was midmorning in Washington. Such conference calls were rare, underlining the urgency these officials viewed the topics discussed. Speaking for the group, Bundy again stated that U.S. military personnel were not permitted to fly RLAF T–28s in combat—it was too risky. If there were enough T–28 qualified Air America pilots, thought should be given to using them. Though skeptical over the difference a handful of T–28s would make, Washington was willing to turn the four Water Pump planes over to the RLAF. If needed, more fighters could be procured from the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF), currently converting from the T–28 to the A-1. Lastly, Washington was willing to weigh a shift of USAF personnel to Vientiane to assist in ordnance loading.[68]

Unger replied that the four Water Pump T–28s were now in Laotian hands and had flown several missions that day. He told them he had earlier dispatched five USAF armament specialists to Wattay under civilian cover. Seven Air America pilots had previous T–28 experience, and three more could be provided by Bird and Sons, another civilian contract airline.[69] All needed minor refresher training and checkouts that could easily be handled by Water Pump. If this road were taken, ten additional T–28s would have to be shipped in. Still, Unger did not see how this choice was "any more secure or gets us any less dirty vis-a-vis the Geneva Accords" than using USAF personnel. However, if Washington wanted to substitute Air America pilots, he believed Souvanna would go along.[70]

Turning to reconnaissance, the group wanted Unger to press Souvanna to authorize continuing low-level jet flights. Such missions would pinpoint potential RLAF targets along the Paksane-Plain of Jars axis. Then, too, they would uplift FAR morale, particularly when flown in partnership with the T–28s as Unger had proposed. The prime minister should be reminded

66. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1338, May 17, 1964, 1350, May 18, 1964, AmEmb Bangkok to AmEmb Vientiane, 308, May 17, 1964.

67. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1350, May 18, 1964, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 181800Z May 64.

68. Msg, Washington to Vientiane (telecon), 181600Z May 64.

69. Bird and Sons' contract was with the Royal Laotian Government, not with the Agency for International Development that had Air America's. Bird did not possess cargo carriers like the C–46 or C–47. It relied on the smaller Helio Courier and Pilatus Porter aircraft that were better suited for short-takeoff-and-landing airfields. [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 011237Z Aug 63.]

70. Msg, Washington to Vientiane (telecon), 181600Z May 64.; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1362, May 19, 1964.

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that aerial reconnaissance was a noncombat operation that could furnish him facts he could no longer get through the ICC. Unger should be aware—but not tell Souvanna—that this afforded a golden opportunity to route the planes over the Ho Chi Minh Trail on their way north. The need for pictures of the infiltration net into South Vietnam was termed acute. Bundy also wanted to know if it mattered whether Air Force RF–101s or Navy AD-3s did the job.[71]

(S) Unger was still unenthusiastic about the aerial reconnaissance proposal, yet was willing to give it another try with Souvanna. Since the chief motive for this reconnaissance was to photograph the Ho Chi Minh Trail, not to detect enemy forces on the Plain of Jars, Unger stressed that these aircraft would have no real value for the prime minister and could have severe repercussions for him if the Pathet Lao publicly protested. He promised to do his best, asserting that even if Souvanna acquiesced, "he won't like it." As far as aircraft went, the ambassador had no preference.[72]

(S) To save time, the Joint Chiefs directed Admiral Felt to transfer five T–28s and five RT–28s, with full armament and camera systems, from South Vietnam to Udorn. The former VNAF aircraft were to be repainted with Laotian markings, but Cochran would not turn them over to the RLG until told to do so by Ambassador Unger. Checkouts of Air America pilots in the T–28s were also authorized. In addition, Able Mable at Tan Son Nhut and U.S. naval units operating off Vietnam were alerted to be prepared to fly reconnaissance missions over Laos the following day.[73]

(S) Early the next morning (May 19, 1964), Unger again broached the jet reconnaissance question to Souvanna. As instructed, he made no mention of flights in the Laotian corridor. He later reported that the prime minister "looked somewhat troubled" but after some thought said, "If they insist, I would not oppose, but they must take full responsibility." Souvanna did not comment on the point that these aircraft, albeit American, would not be engaged in combat. He expressed little enthusiasm for U.S. civilian pilots in T–28s and vetoed outright the proposal that Thai pilots with civilian Laotians papers fly the planes. Consequently, Unger asked Washington to hold up the reconnaissance until he could assess T–28 results and the possibility of using the RT–28s coming from South Vietnam.[74]

(S) The flights were not held up—once Souvanna's permission was in hand, Washington wasted no time in launching the alerted reconnaissance aircraft. That same day, Able Mable RF–101s flew low-level "show of force" missions along the Laotian panhandle (reconnaissance over North Vietnam or west of 105° E was forbidden). The State Department announced that the flights were justified because of the long-standing refusal of the communists to permit ICC inspection of their territory. The photos, however, did not disclose any targets worth striking.[75]

(S) That evening, Unger and chargé Chadbourn dined with Souvanna and other Western diplomats. To their surprise, Souvanna began speaking "in stinging terms" of a Pathet Lao betrayal and the losses recently suffered by neutralist forces on the Plain of Jars. Apparently, he had just received a message from Souphanouvong denying any Pathet Lao role whatsoever in the recent fighting, and his other diplomatic undertakings had not borne fruit. Earlier in the day, the Soviet ambassador had told him that his country was washing its hands of Laos and would not

71. (S) See note 68.
72. (S) See note 68.
73. (S) Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 6379, May 19, 1974; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 269.
74. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1355, May 19, 1964.
75. (S) Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 269; 1st Lt Robert L. McNaughton, *Yankee Team, May 1964–June 1965* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), p 2. Apparently these pictures were of so little value that COMUSMACV neglected to send them to Vientiane. Unger quickly made it known that he expected all prints to be sent to the embassy for interpretation. [Msg, [redacted] retransmitted by JCS to White House and SECSTATE, 210819Z May 64.]

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pressure the Pathet Lao to return to Vientiane or to their former positions on the plain. Several times Souvanna said it seemed to him that force was all that was left. He became so distraught that he pointedly asked Unger what was the United States waiting for. Why didn't it bomb North Vietnam and communist China? The ambassador countered with the proposal to augment the RLAF with additional T–28s flown by American [redacted] pilots. Souvanna unhesitatingly approved.[76] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

(S) Owing to the prime minister's attitude change and his own conviction that it would take a concrete show of force to dissuade the communists, Unger now withdrew any previous reservations or objections to low-level jet reconnaissance. In fact, embassy attachés would soon forward to CINCPAC priority areas to be photographed. Until the T–28s could mount follow-up strikes, however, Unger wanted no reconnaissance. Washington did not heed the ambassador's wishes, and another effort was mounted the next day by Able Mable and U.S. Navy RF–8As from the USS *Kitty Hawk*. Again, there was little significant photography.[77] CIA

(S) By this time, Kong Le's situation was considered so critical that reconnaissance was scheduled for May 21 over the Plain of Jars and the roads leading to it from North Vietnam. Pathet Lao forces were reported west of the new neutralist headquarters at Muong Soui near the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. If Muong Soui were lost, the neutralist army for all practical purposes would disappear and the neutralist political party would probably end as well. The Pathet Lao would likely wind up controlling all of northern Laos. The ambassador saw the small T–28 force as the one effective deterrent to a communist takeover of the area.[78]

(S) Time was now urgent. Almost from the minute the first group of former VNAF T–28s touched down at Udorn on May 20, Water Pump personnel began training the five Air America pilots Unger selected. In light of their past experience in fighters (all were former U.S. servicemen), just a minimum checkout in the T–28 and a few passes over the practice bombing range were given. By May 23, the pilots were judged operationally capable but with varying degrees of proficiency in ordnance delivery. To reduce exposure, the crews and aircraft would stay overnight at Udorn in place of Vientiane. Each morning, the unarmed T–28s would fly to Wattay for refueling and ordnance loading by Water Pump specialists. A rudimentary air operations center (AOC) was set up in a rice warehouse belonging to Air America to provide centralized control of the augmented air resources. The pilots were briefed at the AOC by the air commandos on the targets furnished by the air attaché and the Controlled American Source representative.[79]

(S) [redacted] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA

76. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1368, 1369, May 20, 1964.
77. (S) Msgs, AmEmb to SECSTATE, 1370, 1373, May 20, 1964; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 269; McNaughton, p 2.
78. (S) Kenneth Sams, *Escalation of the War in Southeast Asia, July-December 1964* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1965), p 3; msgs, CJCS to CINCPAC, 201653Z May 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 211314Z May 64.
79. (S) Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1034, May 20, 1964.

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(S) On May 21 and 22, reconnaissance was flown over the Plain of Jars, apparently with good results. Kong Le commented on the upsurge in morale when his troops first detected the RF–101s dipping low over their positions. A U.S. observer at the scene said the neutralists literally jumped up and down with joy when they saw the USAF planes. The battlefield reverted to calm the next day, but on the 24th the Pathet Lao resumed pressuring Kong Le. The neutralist general was rumored ready to abandon Muong Soui and retreat into the surrounding hills. With two T–28s down for maintenance, the RLAF only had four available. Souvanna phoned Ambassador Unger, seeking to help Kong Le with air strikes. Unger explained that [redacted] to do anything quickly, he would have to use Air America personnel. Souvanna hesitated. After his dinner with Unger on May 19, he began to have doubts about letting these pilots fly Laotians T–28s. Even so, the desperate conditions at Muong Soui impelled him to approve the use of American pilots.[81]

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(S) The following day, the Air America pilots flew ten sorties, mostly armed reconnaissance along Route 7 in the Plain of Jars. The road was cratered in several spots, but attempts to create rock slides and destroy bridges with five-hundred-pound bombs proved fruitless. Unger, present at Wattay when the afternoon sorties touched down, was distressed when he saw the numerous bullet holes in the T–28s. Antiaircraft fire, apparently unknown to the crews, had spattered several of the planes during their bombing/strafing runs. This led Unger to stop the use of Air America pilots. He feared not only the loss of T–28s and crews but exposure of such combat operations to the press, ICC, and other embassies. From his Wattay visit, the ambassador concluded that in the long run it would be most difficult to keep these activities secret.[82] He also temporarily closed the AOC.[83]

(S) Now, and apparently without touching base with Colonel Law, his Army attaché, Ambassador Unger called for limited U.S. Army intervention to restore conditions on the Plain of Jars to what they were before May 16. The ambassador envisioned a short campaign; once the neutralists were back in control of the area, the U.S. troops would withdraw. He likened this action to that taken by President Eisenhower in Lebanon during 1958. Unger frankly admitted that the enemy could escalate or hit another area; Souvanna might not see it through; and the enemy would reoccupy the Plain of Jars immediately after the U.S. forces withdrew. Nevertheless, he believed that unless such action took place, neutralism would be destroyed as a force that could stand up to the communists and bring peace to Laos.[84]

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80. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1971, May 21, 1964, 1998, May 22, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1382, May 21, 1964; MSgt Robert T. Helmka and TSgt Beverly Hale, *USAF Operations from Thailand, 1964–1965* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), p 31.

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81. (S) Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX–233, May 22, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 221207Z May 64, 240956Z May 64; memo, Richard M. Helms, Dep Dir/Plans, CIA, to McGeorge Bundy, Jr., Gen Maxwell D. Taylor, USA, William P. Bundy, John T. McNaughton, and Brig Gen Lucius D. Clay, Jr., subj: [redacted] Assessment of Situation in Plain of Jars and Immediate Requirement to Bolster Friendly Forces in Laos, May 23, 1964.

82. (S) If queried by the press, Unger intended denying U.S. pilots ever took part in such actions. This would follow the desires of Souvanna who, only a few days before, had suggested Unger do as he did: say nothing. In this respect he was merely copying the communists—"They don't say anything or when they do, they lie." [Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1442, Mar 27, 1964, and 221207Z May 64.] The State Department cautioned against issuing a flat denial because someday the facts might be known and embassy credibility would suffer. If it ever became known (and State thought that highly unlikely), Souvanna could issue a statement saying the gravity of the situation on the Plain of Jars forced the RLG to contract temporarily the services of a few civilian pilots. Then, at his discretion, Unger could confirm that the foreigners hired were Americans. [Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1093, May 28, 1964.]

83. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1442, May 27, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

84. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1430, May 25, 1964 [retransmitted by SECSTATE to White House (McGeorge Bundy), 260053Z May 64].

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Air Power Backs Up the New U.S. Strategy

The Army General Staff strongly opposed a ground intervention in Laos, contending that "Ambassador Unger is looking for a cheap solution to a big problem, and his recommendation will not achieve significant results, either psychological or military." The operation was neither feasible nor similar to the troop landings in Lebanon. Tactically, the enemy controlled the high ground surrounding the Plain of Jars, much like the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu. Complicating matters was the onset of the rainy season, and the plain would soon be a big mud hole. Any intervening force needed land lines of communication, but these were controlled by the enemy, who had the added advantage of interior lines. Though air supply was possible, there were no suitable airfields and considerable airlift would be required. Weather and enemy antiaircraft guns were another factor. Finally, U.S. troops on the Plain of Jars would likely trigger both a North Vietnamese and a Chinese communist reaction, as in Korea. If it had to intervene, the Army favored activating CINCPAC OPlan 32-64, which was designed for just the type of contingency Unger thought the United States faced. Better still, allow the Air Force to attack North Vietnam. This would send a signal to Hanoi while striking "at the heart of the PL/NVA political base that is directing these efforts." The Army concluded by calling for a revision of U.S. political objectives in Southeast Asia in lieu of a limited military operation designed to show support for a neutral Laos. It seemed to the General Staff, that for the past two years, American policy had failed to keep Laos neutral or do much to deter communist aggression throughout Southeast Asia. When Colonel Law's message supporting the Army's position reached Washington, Unger's plan for ground intervention was shelved.[85] This meant that once more, somehow, air power would have to do the job.

Attention now focused on introducing into Laos a SAW unit similar to the Farm Gate detachment in South Vietnam. Admiral Felt disliked the idea, noting that, since Farm Gate's deployment to Bien Hoa in November 1961, it had come to mean different things to different people. At first, it was to train VNAF pilots and maintenance personnel in the T–28. Yet, combat missions were authorized, if the VNAF lacked the necessary training and equipment to conduct the mission and the flight was confined to South Vietnam. To lend a training cover to the combat strikes, a combined USAF/VNAF crew was needed. Felt presumed these rules would apply to any Laos Farm Gate operation. If so, indigenous crews would severely limit the unit's success. The undermanned RLAF had but twenty-three pilots to fly twenty T–28s and RT–28s, thirteen C–47s, and eight liaison aircraft. The Air America pilots would help relieve the strain, but Unger had halted their flying T–28s. Felt also commented that enemy antiaircraft was far more sophisticated in Laos than in South Vietnam and, sooner or later, Washington could expect an American crew to be shot down. Fear of this had induced Unger to cease using the Air America pilots. The ambassador had likewise ended all American activity at Wattay in the belief it could not be kept secret for very long. The same logic applied to placing a USAF unit there. Consequently, Felt recommended against a Farm Gate detachment for Laos, voicing strong support for overt operations with modern aircraft. Like the plan for U.S. Army intervention, the Farm Gate proposal was quickly dropped.[86]

American hopes were now pinned on the four RLAF T–28s Thao Ma kept at Vientiane (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

[redacted] Water Pump instructor pilots swiftly discovered that C/A

85. Memo, Brig Gen John C. F. Tillson III, USA, Dir/Ops, to DCS/Mil Ops, USA, subj: Analysis of Message in DA IN 300175, May 27, 1964; msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA ARMA, CINCPAC, CX–248, May 29, 1964.

86. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 021615Z Jun 64.

87. Six T–28s were stationed at Savannakhet for operations in southern Laos. During May 17–31, 135 T–28 sorties were flown, but just 36 were in northern Laos. Most of these were used to destroy supplies left behind by Kong Le. [Msg, USARMA and USAIRA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, *et al*, 10278, Jun 11, 1964.]

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their students were well versed in day formation flying, but "it took almost . ... direction from [redacted] to get one to turn a prop when there were many clouds in the sky or if it was getting dark. None could fly by instruments and only a handful had flown cross-country navigation legs or dispensed live ordnance. Therefore, the [redacted] program exceeded Air America T–28 training but was less than that needed by RLAF pilots. It included ordnance delivery and night instrument flying. Five pilots were released for combat by June 1 and the remainder one week later. Two of the less proficient flyers were also trained in photo reconnaissance.[88]

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(S) Ambassador Unger now reopened the Wattay AOC. The procedure that had been started with the Air America pilots was followed [redacted] where they were armed and refueled. The pilots were briefed on targets furnished initially by the FAR general staff. If the mission entailed close air support, Lao or Meo observers were usually supplied. Each pilot flew a morning and afternoon sortie [redacted] The Water Pump personnel (two officers, ten enlisted men) stayed in Vientiane in quarters furnished by the embassy.[89]

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

(S) Most of the targets struck by the [redacted] pilots between June 1–5 were along Route 7 east of the Plain of Jars.[90] The road was cratered in several places and one wooden bridge was reported destroyed. The RLAF pilots supported the neutralists west and northwest of the plain, flying eighty-eight sorties on thirty-two missions. No damage was reported, although forty-four 500-pound high-explosive and sixteen 250-pound fragmentation bombs were dropped. Following the bombing missions, Kong Le had not been completely pushed off the Plain of Jars and the communist attacks subsided. From the evidence, however, it appeared the monsoon rains had stopped them rather than the sprinkling of T–28s.[91]

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

ALL CIA ONLY

(S) What was becoming obvious was the embassy's growing dependency on air to curb the communists or at least to make them think twice before taking further aggressive action. This trend had been growing for the past two years, ever since the MAAG withdrew. Still, air power was not a panacea. As the Army General Staff pointed out to Billy Mitchell and his followers in the 1920s, air power could not gain, hold, or occupy terrain; only ground forces could do this. However, air power was all the embassy or the Royal Laotian Government had; and without a MAAG to work in the country with the FAR and neutralist armies, it was clear that little could be expected of them. In fact, the longstanding axiom that government forces could hold their own against Pathet Lao units without NVA cadres was now questionable. Pure Pathet Lao units did defeat, almost at will, government forces. The latter's esprit, motivation, and willingness to fight seemed as elusive as before. The answer did not lie in more material assistance because government troops were already better equipped than the Pathet Lao. Deploying U.S. ground forces to the Plain of Jars might have restored the status quo, but the stakes were too high. During the ensuing years, more and more dependence would be placed by the embassy and RLG on Vang Pao's Meo, [redacted] and on air power to hold government territory, stop communist advances, and even go on the offensive.

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

CIA & STATE

88. (S) Rprt, AIRA Bangkok, Capability of RTAF Pilots, DIA 1895011164, Jul 28, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; Sams, *Escalation of the War in Southeast Asia, July-December 1964*, pp 171–72.
89. (S) Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA CIIC, 260935Z Jun 64.
90. (S) Bad weather grounded the Thai pilots for two of the five days.
91. (S) Msg, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, *et al*, 10278, Jun 11, 1964.

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[redacted]

Chapter V

The Pace Quickens: Summer 1964 (U)

(b)(1)
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(S) While [redacted] and Laotian T–28 pilots flew intermittent air strikes in northern and central Laos, Air Force and Navy reconnaissance crews zigzagged across the country. The effort was only four days old when Admiral Felt complained that parceling out the missions one day at a time prevented proper sortie planning. He further implied that Washington was over controlling; field commanders were better placed to make proper military decisions than others thousands of miles away. Even though the Joint Chiefs may have agreed with Felt, there was too much high-level interest in the reconnaissance to allow CINCPAC much leeway. Nevertheless, on May 25, 1964, the operating rules for the missions—now christened Yankee Team—were relaxed a bit. Felt could schedule and launch them on a continuing basis, including occasional ones for night and infrared photography. Except in unusual circumstances, such as situations demanding quick action, he submitted all scheduled sorties to Washington thirty-six hours in advance. The information submitted included target description, reasons for the mission, and specific justification if the sortie rate exceeded nine aircraft in any twenty-four hours. Unless he was told to modify or cancel a sortie, the missions went as planned.[1]

CIA

(S) The Joint Chiefs of Staff specified 2d Air Division as the coordinating agency for all reconnaissance; and General Moore, 2d Air Division Commander, immediately set up a Yankee Team command post in his headquarters. An Air Force officer was sent to the USS *Kitty Hawk*, and, in turn, Rear Adm. William F. Bringle (TG 77.4 commander) detailed a captain, two lieutenants, and two yeomen to the Navy liaison office in the command post. For planning purposes, Moore assigned the Navy all missions north of 18° 30'. Thus, the Navy handled the reconnaissance in northern Laos, and that in the south or panhandle fell to the Air Force.[2]

(S) The overall thrust of Yankee Team's several tasks was to show U.S. willingness to match escalating moves in Laos. The flights hoped to document Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese violations of the Geneva accords for later use by the Royal Laotian Government and the International Control Commission. It was this phase of the operation that State Department briefers played up to the press and that later embarrassed Unger. The reconnaissance missions supported requests from the air attaché and Army attaché at Vientiane for pictures of enemy supply dumps, bivouac areas, transportation convoys, and possible road interdiction points in northern and central Laos. These photos were used to develop potential targets for T–28 strikes. Another Yankee Team task—the most significant for U.S. military planners—was the gathering of intelligence on enemy construction and infiltration along the Ho Chi Minh Trail leading into Cambodia and South Vietnam, but these flights did not have the specific approval of Souvanna Phouma. Finally, Yankee Team's reconnaissance missions gave a psychological shot in the arm to the Laotians, Thai, and other friendly forces in Southeast Asia.[3]

(S) Air Force and RLAF RT–28 photography was developed by the Able Mable reconnaissance task force at Tan Son Nhut. Duplicates were shipped to Washington for use by

1. (S) Msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, 230229Z May 64, JCS to CINCPAC, 251737Z May 64.
2. (S) McNaughton, p 4.
3. (S) Memo, ACS/Intel, MACV, to Gen Paul D. Harkins, USA, COMUSMACV, subj: Laos Low Level Reconnaissance Operations ("Yankee Team" Operations), Jan 15, 1964, in Harkins' Fact Book, Feb 62-Jun 64, Tab B; msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 260836Z May 64.

President Johnson, the Pentagon, and the National Photographic Interpretation Center. Eventually (but not at first) positives were sent to Vientiane for use by the country team and now and then by the FAR general staff.[4] The original negative was flown to the 67th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron (RTS) at Yokota Air Base, Japan, where additional copies for theater use were made. Navy film was developed onboard the carriers, then sent to Cubi Point, Philippines, for more prints. From there, the pictures went to Washington.[5]

(b) (b) (S)

CIA STA

Yankee Team had been working only a week when Ambassador Unger asked for a two-day standdown between May 28 and 30. The priority targets, based on Army attaché, air attaché, [redacted] recommendations, had been covered. Although Unger had seen just a few photos, the pilot debriefings cabled to him by air and naval authorities had indicated a majority of the missions successful. He believed the hoped-for political and psychological impact of the flights had been achieved and a steady continuation at the same level was not likely to deter the Pathet Lao. Besides, northern Laos had been quiet the past few days. Should the enemy resume the offensive, the flights could easily be put back on. Finally, he thought General Moore and Admiral Bringle might welcome the chance to "recheck their flight plans." A few of the planes had met flak, and several Navy pilots had reported their electronic warning equipment showed enemy radar lock on. However, Washington did not suspend the flights. General Moore asked for authority to scramble U.S. aircraft in search and rescue (SAR) missions in case any plane was shot down over Laos, but no action was taken on Moore's request.[6]

Unger was peeved because he had not received any Yankee Team photos covering the Plain of Jars, even though, back in Washington, State Department spokesmen were telling reporters these photos had been handed over to the ICC and Souvanna. As a result, the embassy, Souvanna, and the ICC were being buttonholed by newsmen wanting to know what information had been garnered from the reconnaissance missions. So far, the wolves had been kept at bay, but the ambassador knew a persistent press would ultimately dig out the truth. He urgently petitioned Washington to rush him the pictures so he could turn them over to Souvanna and the ICC.[7]

Unger had not received any photography from the early Plain of Jars flights because it was U.S. Navy film and had been flown to the Philippines for duplication. The Air Force had taken pictures over northern Laos on May 21-22, but the photographic processing cell at Tan Son Nhut ran out of print paper after the May 19 sortie. The negatives from the next three days were flown to Japan for reproduction, and delivery to Washington was delayed until May 25. To ensure the best exploitation and accuracy, the results were analyzed at the National Photographic Interpretation Center. The State Department was told the untrained eye could not detect Pathet Lao/NVA violations of the accords unless "a carefully developed annotation and narrative" was attached to the photos; but from the pictures given the center, interpreters could not prove NVA intervention. Hence, the package they gave Unger concentrated on territory formerly held by the neutralists and the FAR. The pictures showed that this territory was now occupied by the communists and that they were being resupplied from North Vietnam.[8]

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4. Many of the Yankee Team photos carried a "No Foreign Dissemination" tag. The CINCPAC microfilm viewed by the authors has many requests from Unger and Tyrrell to remove this classification from certain pictures so that the pictures could be given to the FAR General Staff, Souvanna, and the ICC.
5. Memo, ACS/Intel, MACV, to Gen Paul D. Harkins, USA, COMUSMACV, subj: Laos Low Level Reconnaissance Operations ("Yankee Team" Operations), Jan 15, 1964, in Harkins' Fact Book, Feb 62-Jun 64, Tab B; msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 260836Z May 64.
6. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1441, May 27, 1964, CTG 77.4 to COMSEVENTHFLT, 251515Z May 64.
7. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1414, May 24, 1964.
8. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1063, May 24, 1964, 1089, May 27, 1964; hist, PACAF, Jan-Jun 64, I, pt 1, A-2.

When the ambassador received the photo boards with narrative on June 3, he was disappointed. (A similar set was given Ambassador Martin for the use of the Thai embassy and the RTS.) In Unger's view, the pictures failed to document communist violations of the accords. Although the reconnaissance had signaled American concern, the poor results were now overshadowed by the distinct possibility an aircraft might be shot down. The T–28 pilots already reported many more 37-mm antiaircraft positions on the Plain of Jars, and Unger proposed again that reconnaissance over northern Laos be curtailed but not suspended. Widely spaced rechecks of key areas were still needed to pinpoint new concentrations, shifts of enemy units, and altered or camouflaged installations. Unger stressed that his comments applied solely to northern Laos, not the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the panhandle.[9]

Admiral Felt was in basic, but not total, agreement with Unger. Photo requirements were not as high as when the Pathet Lao "were knocking Kong Le off the PDJ."[10] Recon could be random, say, twice a week, but not until there was better coverage of northern Laos. Moreover, spot checks would not likely produce the proper T–28 targets. Only regular photo and visual reconnaissance would discover trucks, troop concentrations, and supply buildups.[11]

Unger found an ally in Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Jr., CINCPACFLT, who thought the results did not justify the effort. Roads and areas of suspected Pathet Lao/NVA activity had been reconnoitered repeatedly without locating significant numbers of troops or war materials. The hazards of poor visibility and low-level flying in mountainous terrain had forced stereotyped tactics. So far, he added, 50 percent of the Navy's Yankee Team planes had encountered ground fire. Sharp feared that if the enemy's guns were massed, one of the reconnaissance planes could easily be mousetrapped. Like Unger, Sharp wanted the Yankee Team tempo slowed to random flights.[12]

What Unger and Sharp feared occurred on June 6. A Navy RF–8A from the *Kitty Hawk*, flying at twelve hundred feet near Xieng Khouang, was downed by communist flak. At this time, General Moore's earlier request to use U.S. aircraft in Laos for SAR still had not been approved. Even though a rescue coordination center manned by a few rescue controllers was set up in Saigon AOC, no professional USAF SAR forces were in Southeast Asia when the RF–8A was lost. The prevailing MACV view was that VNAF, U.S. Army, or Marine helicopters could perform any SAR. This might work in South Vietnam; but in Laos, such U.S.-conducted operations were forbidden by the Geneva accords. The task accordingly fell to Air America. Fortunately, two of their transports, a C–123 Provider and a C–7 Caribou, were near Xieng Khouang at ten thousand feet when the Navy aircraft was shot down. The transports intercepted the pilot's "mayday," immediately jettisoned their cargoes, and began directing the SAR. Two Helio Couriers and two H–34s of the airline were flown to the scene, and Meo guerrillas in the vicinity were alerted for a possible extraction. Because of poor communications, none of the Air America people knew they were looking for an American pilot.[13]

Meanwhile, Colonel Tyrrell requested that Ambassador Unger let U.S. aircraft fly cover for the rescue helicopters. Unger sent [redacted] instead, but they could not contact the downed flyer, Lt. Charles F. Klusmann. The helicopters were compelled to turn back when a crewman

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9. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1114, Jun 1, 1964, 1512, Jun 4, 1964.
10. Felt was in error. Kong Le still retained forces on the western and southern fringes of the plain and several scattered redoubts in its heart.
11. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 052030Z Jun 64.
12. Msg, CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, 060420Z Jun 64.
13. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1528, Jun 6, 1964, 1532, Jun 6, 1964, 2d AD to 13th AF, 061037Z Jun 64 (retransmitted by CSAF to SECSTATE, 061635Z Jun 64), AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2116, Jun 10, 1964; Helmka and Hale, pp 116-17; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 271; Capt B. Conn Anderson, *USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961-1966* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), pp 1-2, 32.

was wounded by intense enemy ground fire. The SAR commander in the Helio Courier then called for maximum fighter support so the downed pilot could be picked up by another Air America helicopter that was en route.[14]

By coincidence, General Moore was visiting Udorn when the first distress call came in and monitored the rescue from the Air America operations center. When the call came in for more fighters, Moore got in touch at once with Gen. Jacob E. Smart, CINCPACAF,[15] and Admiral Felt. With their approval, he launched three T–28s with Water Pump pilots and five Takhli F–100s. Admiral Bringle added four *Kitty Hawk* F–8s and two Da Nang A–1s.[16]

Tyrrell called Unger and, after explaining the situation, asked for additional T–28s. Unger agreed to the use of Air America personnel, and the first pair of T–28s took off from Wattay at four in the afternoon, five minutes behind the T–28s with USAF pilots. A second pair was airborne fifty-five minutes later. As the weather worsened and the downed pilot could not be found, Admiral Felt issued a recall. He then stressed that, in the future, only nonmilitary resources would be committed to SAR operations in Laos. The recall was of slight immediate consequence, since Klusmann had been captured earlier by the Pathet Lao.[17]

What could have been a serious confrontation between Thai and American officials over the search and rescue attempt was averted by the quick thinking of Ambassador Martin and his air attaché, Colonel McCoskrie. Martin was alerted by McCoskrie within an hour of Klusmann's first "mayday." Both instantly knew that once the SAR was put in motion, the next logical step was to order the Thai-based USAF aircraft to fly cover. Martin assumed that, under the loose command arrangements governing USAF activities in Thailand, little or no attention would be paid to the specific restriction against using RTAF bases for overt strikes in Laos. Not desiring to inhibit the employment of every available resource to hunt for Klusmann, Martin did not mention this restriction. Aware of Thai sensitivity to being taken for granted, he solicited and received from Air Chief Marshal Dawee approval to use these planes. As expected, that afternoon the 2d Air Division relayed General Smart's message scrambling the five F–100s from Takhli.[18]

The episode caused Martin to conclude "this is really a hell of a way to run a railroad." It appeared to him that once it was decided to fly reconnaissance in Laos, the need for using Thai bases should have been seen and the proper coordination worked out. "I would much rather irritate the prime minister by getting him out of bed," he continued, "than explain why we casually assumed authority to utilize his country's facilities without his permission." Martin believed the Klusmann search and rescue effort spotlighted the need to plan future operations far ahead and be able to carry them out quickly.[19]

Back in Washington, the Yankee Team loss was not taken lightly. President Johnson called on his close advisers on the morning of June 6. They opted for conducting two reconnaissance flights escorted by six to eight fighter-bombers the next day. If the reconnaissance plane was shot at, the escorts would reply in kind. Everyone agreed Souvanna's permission was

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14. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-206, 061650Z Jun 64; intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Robert L. F. Tyrrell, USAF, Ret, May 12, 1975.
15. General Smart became PACAF commander when General O'Donnell retired on August 1, 1963.
16. Msgs, 2d AD (Maj Gen Joseph H. Moore) to CTG 77.4 (Rear Admn William F. Bringle), Jun 7, 1964, Udorn Aprt (Maj Gen Joseph H. Moore) to 2d AD (Maj Gen Sam Maddux, Jr.), 061250Z Jun 64, CTG 77.4 to CNO, JCS, *et al*, 061150Z Jun 64.
17. See note above; msgs, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-206, 061650Z Jun 64, CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT, COMUSMACV, *et al*, 061040Z Jun 65, Det 3, Pacific Air Rescue Center to CSAF, 061135Z Jun 64. Klusmann escaped four months later. In a September debriefing, he praised the Air America rescue attempt, noting that every effort was made to reach him despite the intense ground fire. [MSgt Robert T. Helmka and TSgt Beverly Hale, *USAF Operations from Thailand, 1964–65* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), p 116.]
18. Msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2116, Jun 10, 1964.
19. *Ibid.*

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required before such a mission could be flown. Unger should tell the prime minister this action was essential to offset the psychological effects of the loss, show U.S. determination to continue, and to "punish the communist side." So far, the press had not heard of the loss, and the communists had not yet begun to beat their propaganda drum. Washington wanted to break the news before the Pathet Lao did and to say that Unger had Souvanna's concurrence for escorts to fire back when fired on. The group proceeded to honor Unger's prior request that the flights be curtailed but not until the June 7 mission was flown. Further, all future flights would be escorted.[20]

Souvanna assented but vigorously insisted Washington not publicly state it was sending fighters to escort Yankee Team aircraft. He refused to back any statement that acknowledged U.S. planes were attacking antiaircraft batteries in Laos and believed the less said about all this the better. It was wiser to adopt the communist tactics of denial, even lying, if need be. Unger pointed out that the administration was not concerned about communist reaction or propaganda but needed to show Congress and the American people it would not condone defenseless planes being shot down at will. After much discussion, the two men hit upon a new formula. If Washington had to speak of retaliatory strikes, it would say they were flown by RLAF T–28s. Otherwise, it would keep mum.[21] In arriving at this solution, neither Unger nor Souvanna seemed to have realized that the T–28s were too slow to fly cover for the faster jets.

The Navy flight of June 7 was escorted by carrier-based F–8s. The fighters very quickly got their chance to retaliate when the reconnaissance planes took ground fire. An F–8 piloted by Comdr. Doyle W. Lynn was hit on its second pass and Lynn had to eject. Admiral Felt instantly lifted his day-old ban on using military assets for search and rescue. He sent four Da Nang A–1s to cover the Air America helicopters and dispatched tankers to refuel the F–8s orbiting over the downed pilot. The AOC in Vientiane diverted [redacted] from searching for Klusmann (as yet, there was no confirmation he had been captured) to the Lynn SAR effort. Washington approved an urgent request from Unger to commit the Water Pump pilots and aircraft. The search proved fruitless, and the T–28 USAF pilots dropped their bombs on areas known to be held by the Pathet Lao. One group, for example, attacked Lima Site 22 near where Klusmann was shot down the day before. Just as the T–28s were heading back to Wattay, the A–1s showed up with bombs and rockets. The Air America SAR commander cleared them to strike enemy flak batteries in the vicinity of the downed pilot. Attacks by a flight of Navy F–8s and eight USAF F–100s followed. Although this was the most U.S. air power sent into Laos, Lynn remained unrescued.[22]

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CIA

After returning to Wattay, Major Cochran, Water Pump commander, pondered the search for Lynn. He discovered that the Navy, unlike the Air Force, had a "warble beacon" that transmitted after a parachute opened. Air America's four C–7 Caribous carried ultra high frequency (UHF) radios that could pick up the signal and home in on it. During debriefing of the Air America pilots, Cochran learned that three of them had heard the beacon signal. Through triangulation, he plotted a new fix that was nearly forty miles from where the wingman reported Commander Lynn had bailed out. At dawn on June 8, the search resumed over this new area. Lynn heard the planes, fired a flare through the overcast, and was rescued by an Air America helicopter. His position was right in the middle of the triangulation.[23]

Despite the successful rescue, Yankee Team reconnaissance flights were temporarily suspended. General LeMay insisted that the Able Mable RF–101s working southern Laos also be escorted when their flights resumed. Objecting, the State Department and Ambassador Unger

20. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1133, Jun 6, 1964.
21. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1537, Jun 6, 1964.
22. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1543, 1553, Jun 7, 1964, CTG 77.6 to CINCPAC, 070615Z Jun 64, 070834Z Jun 64, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, C-13, 070800Z Jun 64; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.
23. Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CTG 77.6, 070834Z Jun 64.

argued that the United States had no mandate whatever from Souvanna authorizing these flights. Inevitably, the escorts would be fired upon and fire back. Another loss was highly likely. How would Unger explain this to Souvanna? What would be his answer when the prime minister learned that missions over the Plain of Jars played second fiddle to those in the corridor? So far, Unger thought Souvanna was unaware of the panhandle flights, or, if he had an inkling, believed the aircraft were merely en route to the Plain of Jars.[24]

LeMay remained adamant, and President Johnson sided with him. On June 8, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered eight F–100s with the specific mission of escorting USAF Yankee Team aircraft deployed from Clark to Tan Son Nhut. In addition, the Lynn shootdown pushed President Johnson to stronger measures. Henceforth, the escorts would precede the reconnaissance planes and strafe or sanitize the area before each photo run to minimize the risk of another loss. Johnson further directed the Air Force to ready a retaliatory strike for June 9. The target was a star-shaped antiaircraft site (actually an old French fort) located about a mile from Xieng Khouang. This gun position was said to be the one that had downed Lynn. Since the Royal Thailand Government still ruled out overt strikes from its bases, the mission would be flown by the eight recently dispatched F–100s now at Tan Son Nhut, not by those at Takhli. Bombs, rockets, and napalm were sanctioned. The State Department admitted these new directives and procedures conflicted with the previous Souvanna-Unger agreement and agreed that Pathet Lao propaganda would capitalize on any strike, suppressive or retaliatory. Even so, the President asked for Unger's comments before approving the mission.[25]

Ambassador Unger urged Washington to reconsider as attacking enemy gun positions would destroy public announcements that the reconnaissance was purely for intelligence gathering. He warned that the escorts could become an end in themselves, that is, purposely flying with Yankee Team to attack flak batteries. Unger saw substantial danger in the United States' "backing or sliding into an escalating situation . . . without a conscious decision to do so or any clear indication of where this road leads." Furthermore, such strikes were inconsistent and in conflict with U.S. political objectives in Laos as he understood them. If deeper involvement had to be accepted, Unger suggested the Air Force augment the RLAF whenever it supported the ground forces of the FAR or the neutralists. Even though his air attachés had told him it was the best ordnance to wipe out gun positions, the ambassador still had grave reservations about dropping napalm. Unger was in a quandary since severe political and propaganda repercussions would certainly follow its first use in Laos. He advocated that if Washington sanctioned napalm, that it be delivered by RLAF T–28s, not Air Force or Navy jets.[26]

General LeMay pressed for approval of napalm. With it on board in lieu of iron bombs, the strike aircraft could fly lower and reduce the risk of another loss. Moreover, the ordnance's spreading characteristics raised the odds on knocking out a gun emplacement. Rusk dissented and, after citing Unger's trepidations and the long history of napalm's prohibition to Secretary McNamara and President Johnson, was upheld. The rest of the mission, however, would go forward as planned.[27]

Unger made one last try to have the Xieng Khouang raid aborted because of Souvanna's possible reaction. The prince had approved armed escorts if the United States give the matter no publicity and if retaliation was immediate (on the same mission)—not this preplanned strike Washington had concocted. The prime minister had made it clear on several occasions that he

24. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1548, Jun 7, 1964.
25. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 072358Z Jun 64, 6706, 072022Z Jun 64, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1152, 1154, Jun 8, 1964.
26. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1551, Jun 7, 1964, 1562, 1563, Jun 8, 1964.
27. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1154, 1155, Jun 8, 1964, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 081905Z Jun 64.

would not publicly acknowledge giving the United States permission to escort its reconnaissance planes. The ambassador hated to think what Souvanna's reaction might be when he discovered the Air Force had deliberately bombed positions in Laos without his approval. Unger envisioned his work of the past two years going up in smoke. If Washington followed through on the strike, Unger wanted the State Department to furnish him the rationale it would put forth to explain this violation of the Geneva accords.[28]

(U) Due to the demand for a fast response to the June 7 loss, the strike order went out before Unger's comments were received. Assistant Secretary Bundy was halfway through this message when Unger's cable came. Bundy knew this put ambassadorial relations with Souvanna in jeopardy. All Bundy could promise was no more reconnaissance until previous missions were reviewed. As a way of smoothing things over with Souvanna, Unger should tell him this was a one-time retaliation designed to "signal . . . Hanoi and Peking that they must leave their neighbors alone before events go too far."[29]

(U) Bundy added that high officials had heard alternative arguments that the recon continue unescorted or that the RLAF T–28s hit the AA site. The former was rejected because no safe flight path could be guaranteed. Besides, more losses without American counteraction would doubtless buoy communist hopes, be roundly criticized in the United States, "and possibly lose us crucial support for the whole course of action we are pursuing in Southeast Asia." The T–28s were ineffective without napalm and stood a good chance of being shot down. Dispensing napalm was vetoed because it could generate serious international repercussions.[30]

(U) In addition, Rusk pressed Unger to abandon the notion that the United States was violating the Geneva accords. "It is a well established principle of international law," the secretary said,

> that where one side grossly violates particular provisions of an agreement such as those forbidding Viet Minh personnel in Laos or the use of Laos as a corridor to South Vietnam that those unilateral violations relieve other parties of relevant restrictions upon themselves. Our objective remains the fullest execution of and meticulous compliance with the Geneva Accords. Central to our policy is full support for Souvanna Phouma despite repeated and contemptuous rejection of his role and authority by the Pathet Lao.[31]

(U) President Johnson's rejection of napalm for the June 9 retaliatory strike triggered a quick armament shuffle at Da Nang. The aircrews had originally planned a low-level napalm run followed by dive-bombing attacks with 750-pound bombs. When the President's order omitting napalm was received shortly after midnight, the canisters were hurriedly unloaded and replaced with bombs. In view of the ordnance switch and because overflights of Thailand were banned, new refueling plans had to be made.[32]

(U) These setbacks were minor and the mission took off as scheduled; but an inflight change in tanker and fighter routes was required, due to towering cumulus that resulted in less than the preplanned fuel for the F–100s over Xieng Khouang. The flights then became separated, and the first four F–100s—with the Water Pump pilots in their T–28s pre-positioned to provide rescue combat air patrol—could not find the target right away because of broken clouds extending from the ridgeline to thirteen thousand feet. When the pilots did find the AA site and went after it, heavy ground fire greeted them. Only six of twenty-eight bombs hit the target. The second flight, also handicapped by the poor weather and absence of navigational aids in Laos, became disoriented. They were about to jettison their ordnance when they spotted a star-shaped fort near

28. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1564, Jun 8, 1964.
29. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1158, Jun 8, 1964.
30. [redacted] *Ibid.*
31. [redacted] *Ibid.*
32. [redacted] Futrell, p 446.

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[redacted]

an airstrip. They attacked this area, which later proved to be near the communist-held town of Phong Savan. Owing to this mixup, about 20 percent of the primary target and 50 percent of the fort near Phong Savan were destroyed. Six of the F–100s made it to their tankers and back to Da Nang. Two, however, were so short of fuel they had to violate instructions and recover at Ubon. The T–28s returned to Udorn, salvoing their ordnance "in a known hot area on the way back." Yankee Team operations were then suspended as Washington promised, pending a thorough review of the photography on hand.[33]

(S) That the second flight of four F–100s on the Xieng Khouang mission had inadvertently struck Phong Savan airfield was not immediately known. On June 10, Washington was startled to hear Hanoi and Peking radios loudly denounce the strafing that day of Khangkhai (the former neutralist capital) by American jets. Souphanouvong's headquarters reported several casualties, and a colonel attached to the Chinese communist economic and cultural (military) mission had been killed. Since a similarity existed between Xieng Khouang and Khangkhai, there was a good chance the F–100s might have mistaken one town for the other. However, Yankee Team had been grounded after the June 9 retaliation strike, but the administration viewed the Hanoi and Peking claims as more than the usual "Chinese communist nonsense." The Joint Chiefs at once scheduled a Lucky Dragon U–2 to photograph the entire Plain of Jars, and a KC–135 flew the developed film from Clark to Washington. Unfortunately, the U–2 mission was 98 percent cloud covered. Xieng Khouang airfield was located; but due to the haze, the photo interpreters could not discern any damage. Khangkhai was completely obscured. By June 12, extensive debriefings of the strike pilots and a thorough examination of bomb damage assessment photography had revealed the second flight's accidental strike at Phong Savan.[34]

(S) This did not solve the problem of who actually hit Khangkhai. The International Control Commission visited the town to find out on June 16, and Souphanouvong then claimed that on June 11 (not the 10th) six T–28s (not U.S. jets) "piloted by Americans" bombed and strafed the village. When questioned about the source of his information identifying American pilots, Souphanouvong merely said he "knew." The ICC was taken on a walk of Khangkhai and shown the bullet holes in Souphanouvong's villa and two bomb craters, the largest seven feet across and five feet deep. As a clincher, the Pathet Lao displayed parts of what they claimed was an F–100 they had shot down. The fragments, however, were clearly identifiable as from an RF–8A, probably from Klusmann's or Lynn's aircraft.[35] This completely destroyed the Pathet Lao claim. Still, the question of who attacked Khangkhai remained a mystery.[36] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

(S) Attention now focused on the RLAF. Thao Ma staunchly denied his Savannakhet-based T–28s had anything to do with the Khangkhai attack, but Unger had his doubts. Others thought [redacted] were to blame since they were working near the Plain of Jars that day.[37] In fact,

33. (S) *Ibid*, pp 446-47; McNaughton, p 6; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 271; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969; msgs, I ASOC to CINCPAC, 090715Z Jun 64; 2d AD, CINCPAC, 091534Z Jun 64, PACAF to CINCPAC, 112205Z Jun 64, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 121835Z Jun 64.

34. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1587, Jun 11, 1964; 1614, Jun 13, 1964; PACAF to CINCPAC, 112205Z Jun 64; CINCPAC to PACAF, 120029Z Jun 64; JCS to DIA, CINCPAC, *et al*, 271329Z Jun 64.

35. (S) Souphanouvong also informed his visitors that Klusmann was a prisoner of the Pathet Lao.

36. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1644, Jun 16, 1964.

37. (S) [redacted] [Intvw, Capt Richard B. Clement and Lt Col Barry L. Bonwit, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Lt Col Drexel B. Cochran, Aug 20, 1969; Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Robert L. F. Tyrrell, USAF, Ret, May 12, 1975.] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

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one press account based on William P. Bundy's "off-the-record" briefing to newsmen fingered [redacted] as the culprits. Nonetheless, the State Department categorically denied [redacted] were involved. By June 18, Unger was forced to declare that whatever occurred was in error or an "action [Laotian [redacted] pilots judge they should not acknowledge." The awkward situation was smoothed over somewhat when Souvanna told newsmen the Laotian pilots had struck the town accidentally and failed to report the incident after landing. Both Souvanna and Unger agreed hitting Khangkhai was regrettable, but they also agreed that the Royal Laotian Government need not apologize for carrying the war to the Pathet Lao.[38]

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After the Xieng Khouang mission, Unger looked for an angry protest from Souvanna once he found out USAF planes had attacked a Pathet Lao battery in violation of their mutual agreement. Souvanna, however, had raised a bigger fuss over an earlier State/Defense briefing given reporters that admitted reconnaissance aircraft were being escorted by jet fighters. He labeled such public disclosures as "very serious . . . beyond his comprehension . . . and a major breach of faith." All through the conversation he kept coming back to an oft-repeated theme—"Act but don't talk about it." Whatever the United States or Laotian governments publicly acknowledge, he continued, plays into communist hands. The communists, if anything, say only what they want and avoid being accused of violating the Geneva accords. With Washington's admissions, Souvanna believed there was real danger of retaliatory air strikes against Vientiane. Unger asserted that neither Congress nor the American people would accept sending unarmed recon planes into areas defended by enemy AA batteries. In that case, Souvanna replied, the flights should stop. The ambassador defended the press briefing as a way to signal Hanoi that the United States was determined not to let their aggressive acts go unpunished. Souvanna remained unmoved. Privately, however, Unger deplored the briefing and expressed amazement that it was done. He felt that as long as the previous line was maintained, the bombings and strafings could be attributed to the T–28s; but with the briefing, the United States had virtually acknowledged that U.S. aircraft "have been bombing and strafing in direct violations of the Geneva Accords."[39]

Meanwhile, back in Washington, information on the Xieng Khouang raid was leaked to the press. With the story about to break, the State Department believed it could no longer hold to "no comment." In a briefing on noon, June 10, it was acknowledged that USAF planes had reconnoitered the Plain of Jars the day before and that escorts had returned fire after being fired upon. State wondered if this briefing would further rile Souvanna.[40]

Unger was beside himself. He had just passed Souvanna a message from Averell Harriman and his own letter of assurance that the United States still supported the prime minister's government and the Geneva accords. He also thought that spokesmen back in Washington were now skirting press queries about operations. Letting the cat out of the bag at this stage only served to make him "a liar a second time in three days." Unger believed Souvanna would no longer have confidence in his word, to say nothing of his government's. Besides, if the briefing was to signal Hanoi, Unger judged it redundant. The Xieng Khouang raid itself "would speak louder to the communists than words released in Washington."[41]

Nevertheless, the briefing was given; and when Unger met with Souvanna on June 11, he fully looked for a verbal upbraiding. To his surprise, Souvanna asked for a resumption of Yankee Team. When the question of escorts was raised, the prime minister posed no objections but restated that he wanted nothing said about them and that questions of protection should be

38. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Paris, 6782, Jun 18, 1964, AmEmb Bangkok, 22307, Jun 21, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1655, Jun 18, 1964, 1613, Jun 13, 1964, 1637, Jun 16, 1964.
39. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1559, Jun 8, 1964; 1567 and 1573, Jun 9, 1964.
40. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1170, Jun 10, 1964.
41. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1586, Jun 10, 1964.

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38. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Paris, 6782, Jun 18, 1964, AmEmb Bangkok, 22307, Jun 21, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1655, Jun 18, 1964, 1613, Jun 13, 1964, 1637, Jun 16, 1964.
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40. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1170, Jun 10, 1964.
41. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1586, Jun 10, 1964.

answered by referring to use of the RLAF T–28s. Unger accepted his point "in principle" but asserted Washington had to continue acknowledging the escorts to assure Congress and the public that the reconnaissance planes were being properly protected. Moreover, by openly mentioning the escorts, the signal Washington wanted Hanoi and Peking to receive would be recognized. Souvanna nodded he understood. If asked by the press why the flights were on once more, the prime minister planned to say that new information had come his way on NVA infiltration and he had requested their resumption. If queried on armed escorts, he would state that he did not object if Washington deemed them necessary for protecting the reconnaissance planes.[42]

(S) This abrupt change in the prime minister's position from disavowal to an agreement with public announcements of Yankee Team missions, including escorts, can more than likely can be attributed to events that occurred in Laos between June 8 and 11. On the 8th, neutralist positions on Phou Kout mountain were lost to the Pathet Lao, including eight tanks and many weapons. The mountain was about thirteen hundred feet higher than the surrounding terrain, giving the communists easy access to Muong Soui (Kong Le's headquarters). Souvanna requested replacements for the tanks and automatic weapons for the neutralists from French Ambassador Pierre L. M. Millet. Millet flatly refused, citing President Charles de Gaulle's policy of not furnishing arms to various Southeast Asia factions, since their possession only encouraged people to fight.[43] Disappointed at this rebuff, Souvanna flew to Luang Prabang to discuss the situation with King Savang Vatthana. The king told the prime minister in no uncertain terms that the escorted Yankee Team flights must continue. Ambassador Unger credited Savang's strong views for tipping the balance, not only in favor of the flights, but also for the press briefings that went with them.[44]

(S) By coincidence, Admiral Felt was likewise changing his mind about Yankee Team, chiefly the role of the escort. He now thought the photo missions served no real purpose and needlessly endangered American lives. If they had to go on, he wanted the escorts put to better use. He frankly conceded that his original aim in recommending them "was to change the rules of the game. In effect, it was to institute armed reconnaissance with the target identifying itself by opening fire." Considering the poor weather prevalent in northern Laos, escort entailed serious tactical problems and safety hazards. Felt wondered if it might not be better to fly unescorted reconnaissance at medium and high altitudes and use the photo results to lay on strikes. He well knew his views did not meet the self-defense criteria, but he deemed them intrinsic to aircrew protection.[45]

(S) General Harkins sided with Felt. Washington should grant blanket approval for strikes on known antiaircraft sites along the mission's flight path before a reconnaissance mission. The sole limitations would be targets within towns or villages. Harkins also argued for dispensing napalm but not near or on areas inhabited by civilians.[46]

(S) Loss of two of his aircraft over the Plain of Jars caused Admiral Sharp to be deeply troubled over stereotyped tactics and enemy AA guns.[47] When tackling flak batteries, the escort

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42. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1587, Jun 11, 1964.

43. (S) Unger replied this was understandable "except for the fact that this is not the policy followed by the communists." [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Conversation with Ambassador Millet, French Ambassador (on June 8, 1964), June 10, 1964.]

44. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1583, Jun 10, 1964, 15, Jul 2, 1964, A-389, subj: Conversation with Ambassador Millet, French Ambassador, on Jun 8, 1964, Jun 10, 1964.

45. (S) Msg, CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT, PACAF, COMUSMAC, 100500Z Jun 64.

46. (S) Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 110425Z Jun 64.

47. (S) Vice Adm Thomas Moorer, Seventh Fleet Commander, reported that neither photo nor electronic intelligence had disclosed the presence of flak batteries "in the classic sense." The airmen were facing large numbers of manually directed machineguns and 37-mm automatic weapons often located on hilltops. The guns depended on volume of fire and were primarily effective against low-flying aircraft. They were often moved and Moorer doubted if the pilots could ever

had to have sufficient altitude and be back far enough to put his sights on the target before he flashed past. Repetitive missions over the limited road network in the Plain of Jars meant the recon planes and Sharp's escorts were "running the gauntlet" for several miles. Sharp favored hitting known antiaircraft positions prior to a photo run.[48]

(S) Opposition to Yankee Team by high-ranking USAF officers was not so severe as that of flag officers in the Navy. Air Force missions seemed to do better than the Navy missions in northern Laos, due in great part to better weather and far fewer AA guns than in the south. Yet, even these missions were showing an alarming trend—the enemy's antiaircraft force in the panhandle was growing almost daily. Not only had new sites been detected, but previously unmanned positions appeared to be active. Many of these RF–101 photos were turned over to the RLAF for targeting, but the Laotians did little with them.[49]

(S) General Smart wanted more flexibility for General Moore and his 2d Air Division staff in the planning of Yankee Team missions. All tactics and technicians, for example, should be the prerogative of the field commander. Only he could determine whether armed escort was required. The type of reconnaissance aircraft, escorts, and ordnance should be left up to 2d Air Division. Like Sharp, Smart warned against stereotyped tactics and standard routes and patterns. He seconded Felt on the suppressive role for escorts and advocated using the most effective "non-nuclear weapons [a pitch for napalm?] available." The best tactic, he concluded, was a single RF–101 with two escorts in visual and radio contact trailing it. When the reconnaissance plane was fired on, it would become a forward air controller (FAC), either directing the escorts or proceeding with the mission alone while the escorts took care of the target. The sole governing factors for this tactic should be weather and terrain.[50]

(S) On June 13, 1964, Yankee Team resumed but under modified operating rules that reflected somewhat the thoughts of Felt and his commanders. The changes included authorization for a weather plane to precede a flight and flying reconnaissance flights at random and intermittent intervals and at medium altitude, that is, above the effective range of hostile ground fire. The rules allowed armed escorts to retaliate against antiaircraft fire either on the same pass with the reconnaissance plane, or by circling back for repeated attacks. Low-level flights were permitted whenever medium-level photography could not produce the needed results, but approval for such flights was granted only for specific, cogent reasons and on a case-by-case basis. The escorts on these flights were free to attack AA sites ahead of the recon aircraft when ground fire suppression was held essential for aircraft and crew safety. The areas selected, however, were confined to those known to be less heavily defended by enemy flak. The Plain of Jars, for example, was avoided whenever possible. So were Route 4 southeast from the plain to Xieng Khouangville and Route 7 east from the plain to around Ban Ban. Samneua and its environs were off limits, as was Tchepone and other selected areas in the panhandle. Finally, Ambassador Unger was sent advanced information on all missions planned (including U–2 flights) and a daily summary of those flown. This enabled him to have precise knowledge of every sortie, so that he could keep Souvanna up to date and rebut communist propaganda charges.[51]

(S) To prevent further conflicts with statements of Souvanna and Unger, the State and Defense Departments established U.S. policy for public disclosures of Yankee Team flights. The

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pinpoint the gun that downed a specific plane. The mountainous terrain, the monsoon, and the five hundred-knot speed of the aircraft rendered such identification very difficult. Rather than trying to hit a questionable machinegun position based on "eyeball identification," Moorer preferred a large-scale conventional attack against selected fixed targets. "I also recommend that such an attack be carefully planned, executed in good weather, and not laid on with a few hours notice." [Msg, COMSEVENTHFLT to CINCPACFLT, 07181Z Jun 64.]

48. (S) Msg, CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, 110437Z Jun 64.
49. (S) Msg, PACAF to CINCPAC, 110620Z Jun 64.
50. (S) *Ibid.*
51. (S) Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 112028Z Jun 64, 161904Z Jun 64, 6985, 221418Z Jun 64.

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instructions stressed that these missions were being flown at Souvanna's request and that the United States deemed armed escorts necessary. Moreover, the need for these escorts had been explained to the satisfaction of the prime minister; and he understood that, in protecting the reconnaissance jets, the escorts might have to return hostile fire. Souvanna had raised no objection, but he had insisted on the need for silence about such retaliation. Thus, it became official policy to admit that reconnaissance was being conducted in Laos "as necessary," but no admission or announcement was made for specific missions. Press inquiries about escorts firing to protect the mission were answered with the official response: "We do not answer questions about operations." If an aircraft were shot down, just the bare facts were given; and if there were overriding reasons why the loss should not be disclosed, it would remain secret. Last, and perhaps more important, selected congressmen and certain allied ambassadors were briefed on Yankee Team operations ("strictly in private and on a need-to-know basis"), but at no time were suppressive tactics conceded. Escorts were depicted as firing only after being attacked by the enemy. It was permissible to say to a very restricted group (not identified in the instructions) that U.S. planes had attacked targets in Laos without having first been fired upon.[52]

By this time, it was clear Souvanna's attitude toward the Pathet Lao was growing more militant. At the meeting when he requested Yankee Team's resumption, he urged more use of the T–28s to interdict enemy supply lines, destroy Pathet Lao caches, and support ground forces. The RLAF now had twenty T–28s (fourteen "on loan") and thirteen qualified pilots. Operating under embassy control were [redacted] in an emergency, six Air America pilots. In addition, ten Laotian pilots were about to enter T–28 training at Water Pump.[53] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

In light of the potential of these air resources, the prime minister approved the FAR General Staff's Operation Triangle. Tentatively set for early July, this plan featured a combined FAR/neutralist/Meo assault on an enemy pocket at Sala Phou Khoun that threatened Route 13 and the rear of Kong Le's Muong Soui headquarters. Souvanna hoped this small offensive, supported by the T–28s, would serve as a springboard for the eventual recapture of the Plain of Jars. Unger was skeptical of the plan but agreed a rise in T–28 sorties was in order. Significantly, the ambassador further favored retaliatory air strikes on Samneua, Xieng Khouangville, Tchepone, and "perhaps against communists outside Laos."[54]

Responding to Souvanna's request for more T–28 missions, the RLAF flew seventeen sorties on June 13 against enemy antiaircraft and artillery positions east of Muong Soui near Phou Kout mountain. Five aircraft were launched against this target in the early morning, and six T–28s hit it again around midday. The results were unknown due to deteriorating weather. That afternoon, another three aircraft flew to the area but found the ground nearly obscured. Rather than return to Wattay, the flight commander dropped the ordnance through the overcast; it landed on friendly troops, wounding two soldiers. In investigating the short rounds, Colonel Tyrrell determined the individual acting as FAG knew next to nothing of air-ground control procedures and could not contact the flight on the briefed radio frequency. Similar incidents could occur since neither the FAR nor the RLAF had a system for controlling air strikes. Thao Ma still refused to furnish personnel for forward air control training or as ALOs to either the neutralists (whom he disliked intensely) or to the FAR (whose generals disliked him). After the Phou Kout incident, Thao Ma became moody and transferred nine T–28s from Wattay to Savannakhet. This left northern Laos almost completely under the purview of the [redacted] USAF air attaché.[55] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

52. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, Bangkok, Saigon, *et al*, 1189, Jun 12, 1964.
53. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1587, Jun 11, 1964, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, CX-332, 260935Z Jun 64.
54. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1587, Jun 11, 1964.
55. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCSTRIKE, CSAF, DIA, *et al*, J-7-64, 132154Z Jun 64, AIRA Laos to

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(S) Tyrrell and Cochran knew it would take cooperation and coordination between air and ground units or Operation Triangle would bog down and fail. Cochran, "to educate the ground troops up there on how to control air a little bit," sent two of his USAF pilots to Muong Soui and Vang Vieng to work as Forward Air Controllers (FACs) with the neutralists. They flew O–1s and occasionally a Controlled American Source C–45. Fearing that one of these planes would be shot down and American participation disclosed, Ambassador Unger ordered the Water Pump FACs to orbit away from the strike area when working the T–28s. With this restraint, the commandos had to abandon controlling the air strikes. Thao Ma then reversed himself and asked for a U–17, so the RLAF could furnish forward air control for Kong Le's troops. On June 18, he received such an aircraft equipped with UHF, VHF, and FM radios. Thao Ma would not base the plane at Muong Soui, fearing the neutralists would harm its crew. A compromise was reached with the RLAF FACs (such as they were) operating from Muong Soui during the day but remaining overnight at Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Tieng (Lima Site 98/20A). Thao Ma also agreed to an RLAF pilot/neutralist observer team in a second U–17. After this plane was shipped in, Thao Ma abruptly turned it over to the neutralists (who could not fly it) and again refused to join the FAC effort. To save the program, two neutralist officers were recruited by Kong Le to fly as backseaters in [redacted] T–28s.[56] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

(S) Tyrrell and Law flew to Savannakhet to confer with Phoumi Nosavan, hoping he could pressure Thao Ma to cooperate. Since Sarit Thanarat's death in December 1963, Phoumi's control of the FAR had been slowly slipping away. Even so, he remained the most powerful figure in the army, and the bond between him and Thao Ma was as strong as ever. At the meeting, Tyrrell cited Thao Ma's failure to supply ALOs, FACs, or strike aircraft for the neutralists and the failure to provide air support for the recent probes by the Meo south of Xieng Khouangville. Because Thao Ma's shortsightedness was hamstringing military operations, Phoumi promised to try and convince him to lay aside his fears and petty jealousies. In spite of Phoumi's pronouncements, no RLAF FACs, ALOs, or liaison aircraft were furnished the government ground forces. Thao Ma's sole concession was to let one neutralist or Meo officer fly in the backseat of his second U–17.[57] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA

(S) The RLAF chief's intransigence—so similar to Phoumi's prior to Nam Tha—did not deter the FAR General Staff (but they would remember Thao Ma's attitude). On June 23, they firmed up plans for Operation Triangle. The plan envisioned a three-pronged attack to secure Route 13 between Vientiane and Luang Prabang and that part of Route 7 running east from the Sala Phou Khoun road junction to Muong Soui. The initial troop deployment would begin on July 1 and the main assault six days later. Ten battalions would be involved, including the three battalions of GM 16 (eighteen hundred men) airlifted from southern Laos. The commitment of southern troops was noteworthy for it marked the first time they had been deployed outside their local military regions since 1962. Opposing them was an enemy force now said to have dwindled to just three battalions, due to logistic troubles brought on by the monsoons. The FAR plan specified prior Yankee Team reconnaissance and considerable airlift, with subsequent resupply by Air America. More important, it included extra USAF armed reconnaissance missions and American pilots in T–28s.[58]

(S) The State Department opposed Operation Triangle; the troops could be better used defending Attopeu and Muong Soui. In particular, State had little enthusiasm for employing American air and now sensed danger in the Laotians "getting out in front of us [rather] than vice versa." As an alternate to Triangle, it proposed holding the line at Muong Soui. To do this (and

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13th AF, 220340Z Jun 64, AIRA to Vientiane to DIA, CX-332, Jun 26, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

56. (S) Msg, AIRA Laos to 13th AF, 220340Z Jun 64; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

57. (S) Msg, ARMA/AIRA Vientiane to DA, CSAF, *et al*, 230700Z Jun 64.

58. (S) Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb London, Paris, *et al*, 7035, Jun 27, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, DIA, CSAF, *et al*, 231350Z Jun 64.

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[redacted]

soothe Souvanna's feelings), State suggested giving the RLAF more T–28s, [redacted][59]

(S) Ambassador Unger dissented. After closely examining the general staff's plan, he admitted it was fraught with danger, might not succeed, "and even if it does . . . it may bring on to our heads and those of the Lao leaders bitter criticism." He conceded the plan entailed extensive U.S. airlift that would highlight the American presence and definitely violate the Geneva accords. However, the ambassador contended that Laos could no longer remain free by the FAR holding the line and staying on the defensive. If Washington did not get behind Triangle, Souvanna would take it "as a clear sign we do not mean all the recent strong statements supporting a free Laos against a communist takeover."[60] Unger was saying it was time for everyone to fish or cut bait.

(S) To ensure the FAR General Staff's definition of armed reconnaissance was the same as his, Unger visited Souvanna on June 26. The prime minister was first asked in general terms if he would approve Yankee Team escorts for purposes beyond retaliation or suppression, for example, cutting Route 7 and supporting Kong Le at Muong Soui. Souvanna said he would prefer to see escorted reconnaissance do whatever it could to cut Route 7 east of Khangkhai or east of Ban Ban. In other words, photo reconnaissance could be used as a cover for armed reconnaissance in certain circumstances. Around Muong Soui, he favored RLAF T–28s, but if a major Pathet Lao/NVA attack erupted, he would welcome the overt support of American jet fighters. Unger observed that, if he judged Souvanna correctly, the prince would let U.S. planes work areas where they were not likely to be seen by many people or where it would be hard for the Pathet Lao to prove U.S. participation.[61] Unger asked if the prime minister would consent to the RLAF dispensing napalm to repel a Pathet Lao assault on Kong Le's headquarters. Souvanna said yes, if genuine military targets were struck. Unger should further confine these missions to the most experienced pilots to avoid short rounds. With Souvanna's approval for napalm, the ambassador again asked Washington for discretionary power to give napalm to the RLAF in case of a sizable new attack by the Pathet Lao, commenting that napalm was the best antipersonnel weapon available. Without it, the T–28s of necessity would resort to high dive angles for bomb release and probably suffer crippling losses from the burgeoning AA fire on the Plain of Jars.[62]

(S) [redacted] Previously, Colonel Law had visited Muong Soui and, as usual, found the neutralists incapable of serving their pieces. As a stopgap, he sent three assistant attachés (artillerists) to Muong Soui to train Kong Le's gunners as best they could in gun emplacement, targeting, and fire control. However, Law felt that the best solution was to import [redacted] gunners. Souvanna was lukewarm to [redacted] gunners, favoring the use of the FAR or French Military Mission personnel. When Unger pointed out that FAR gun crews were no better and that General Lancrenon had forbidden his people from engaging in any operation remotely resembling combat, [redacted][63]

(S) While Washington was digesting this flood of information from Unger, Admiral Felt informed the Joint Chiefs that the VNAF A–1 conversion program was proceeding so smoothly (the VNAF now had eighty A–1s)[64] that surplus T–28s could be turned over to the Laotians at

59. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Bangkok, 1250, Jun 24, 1964.
60. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1694, Jun 25, 1964.
61. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1704, Jun 26, 1964; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: Recce Laos, Jun 29, 1964.
62. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1709, Jun 26, 1964.
63. (S) *Ibid.*
64. (S) Apparently, someone suggested using VNAF A–1s on the Plain of Jars. Felt was opposed since it would dilute the South Vietnam air effort and open the door to further charges of U.S. intervention. [redacted]

ALL CIA

[redacted]

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once. Felt wanted to give the RLAF fifteen more T–28s, lifting its number to thirty-five. If these planes were pooled with Water Pump's four, the T–28s totaled thirty-nine. The RLAF had thirteen qualified fighter pilots and Unger had [redacted] six Air America pilots under his control. With a 75 percent in-commission rate, the Laotians would have twenty-nine T–28s matching twenty-nine pilots. Felt warned that parting with Water Pump's four planes would halt the training of the ten Laotian pilots due to graduate on August 9. [redacted][65]

(b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA & STATE

(b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA

(S) Felt likewise make it plain that if the United States meant to use its air power overtly, "We must not get target fixation in Laos," but be prepared to go against North Vietnam, implement OPlan 32, and "carry it through to the end." CINCPAC correctly noted, "Once the U.S. takes offensive action in Laos in isolation from protecting recce aircraft we have completely and publicly abrogated the Geneva Accords." Because the Laotians had little training in joint air/ground operations, Felt wanted air power used for interdiction against fixed targets rather than for close air support. Last, he repeated that if Washington decided to deal itself into this hand by furnishing air strikes, it must consider North Vietnamese targets and be ready to call any bluff.[66]

(S) The new information from Unger, chiefly Souvanna's comments, and the availability of surplus T–28s provoked second thoughts on Operation Triangle by high U.S. government officials. On June 26, Unger and Felt were advised that President Johnson was reweighing the Laos situation and neither should expect a decision for a couple of days. Yet, it was obvious Johnson was tilting toward Triangle [redacted] Hence, Water Pump's T–28s would not be needed and the training program could continue unimpeded. Further, CINCPAC was to earmark three C–7s and three C–123s for loan to Air America. These transports would move GM 16 from southern Laos to Muong Soui. More significant, Unger was given the long-sought authority to introduce napalm for RLAF employment in case the enemy mounted a new attack. He was told that if Washington decided to back Triangle, it desired the U.S. hand to show as little as possible. Unless there was a major attack on Muong Soui, USAF or Air America pilots in T–28s were ruled out.[67]

(b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA

(S) The next day, the State Department and the Joint Chiefs addressed the problem of committing American air power at Muong Soui. They believed such air strikes "with or without recce cover" would not save the village and would be hard to control unless reliable FACs and FAGs were brought in. There was concern that Souvanna had put too many of his eggs in the airpower basket. Both State and the Pentagon were reluctant to get into any large-scale U.S. air operation around Muong Soui that might fail to blunt the enemy attack. At best, air strikes could hope to cover just the withdrawal and regrouping of the defenders. "Punitive strikes," meaning armed reconnaissance against Pathet Lao targets along Route 7, was a different story. Such actions would "punish the other side," show American determination, and avoid deploying air in a vain attempt to hold Kong Le's headquarters. If the neutralists became scattered or Triangle's three columns could not link up, more sustained and extensive "penalty bombings" would be weighed.[68]

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65. (S) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 260110Z Jun 64 (retransmitted as msg, JCS to White House and SECSTATE, 260532Z Jun 64); memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: T-28s for Laos, Jun 26, 1964.

66. (S) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 260707Z Jun 64.

67. (S) Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1265, Jun 26, 1964, JCS to CINCPAC, 7129, Jun 27, 1964; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: Logistical Support Laos, Jun 24, 1964.

68. (S) Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 1267, Jun 27, 1964.

(b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA

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[redacted]

The War in Northern Laos

On June 29, 1964, the U.S. government formally endorsed Operation Triangle. Yankee Team missions over the Plain of Jars resumed and included night reconnaissance east of Muong Soui. The escorting fighters were allowed to hit any enemy activity detected during such flights, which opened the door to armed recon missions. U.S. Army and Air Force personnel were also allowed to serve as advisors to the Laotian troops, and the ambassador immediately detailed five artillery officers from DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to neutralist artillery at Muong Soui and Vang Vieng. Three USAF detachment members from Udorn were dispatched to Muong Soui, Vang Vieng, and Luang Prabang as "attachés" to work with the three columns as ALOs controlling air strikes. An air operations officer and an intelligence officer were added to the Vientiane AOC by General Moore, 2d Air Division commander.[69]

[redacted][70]

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CIA & STATE

Operation Triangle was set to go on July 6. Heavy monsoon rains, however, caused numerous delays, and only one hundred of the sixteen hundred men from GM 16 could be airlifted from Pakse and Attopeu to Muong Soui. The [redacted] battery, flown in by Air America's new C–7 Caribous, was the last unit to arrive before the field was closed. The weather also hampered other air operations. The RLAF, which had been flying between twenty and thirty T–28 sorties a day in and around the Plain of Jars, was limited to three on July 8 due to the rain and low visibility. In spite of this downturn, the RLAF lost two T–28s to enemy ground fire during the first week of July.[71]

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On July 11, the weather began to clear; and by the 15th, all of GM 16 was positioned at Muong Soui. The next day, a Pathet Lao regiment, supported by 85-mm and 105-mm guns, attacked the headquarters but was beaten back when strafed by the T–28s. Government forces counterattacked on the 19th, aided by [redacted] Laotian artillery that expended nearly twelve hundred 105-mm and 155-mm rounds. Also out in force, twelve T–28s flew thirty-two sorties and dropped sixty-four 500-pound and sixty-four 250-pound bombs. Faced for the first time with a well-planned defense that knitted artillery to heavy T–28 strikes, the enemy fled eastward toward Phou Kout Mountain.[72]

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Densely covered with scrub pine and rising about thirteen hundred feet above the surrounding terrain, Phou Kout dominated the eastern approaches to the Muong Soui valley. Government forces wanted to capture the mountain because it was an ideal observation post for correcting artillery fire and conducting air-ground liaison. Phou Kout was held by two or three companies of dug-in enemy infantry, and its approaches were sowed with antipersonnel mines.[73]

During the next week, two assaults on the hill by government troops were thrown back. A third attack on July 25 was preceded by two days of heavy T–28 strikes. This time the 2d

69. Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 1270, Jun 29, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 10, Jul 2, 1964.
70. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2244, Jun 29, 1964, 55, Jul 13, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 16, Jul 2, 1964.
71. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 27, 48, Jul 8, 1964.
72. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 91, Jul 14, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-331, Jul 20, 1964; rprt, MACV J-2 (Intel), Monthly Intelligence Summary—Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Aug 16, 1964.
73. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-345, Jul 29, 1964.

[redacted]

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Parachute Battalion carried to the summit but, once there, believed it had fallen into a trap and hastily evacuated. A distraught General Amkha now insisted the hill was occupied by North Vietnamese Army troops on orders to hold to the last man. The neutralist general promised a fourth assault in a few days. If it did not succeed, Amkha predicted to Colonel Law that all would be lost.[74]

(S) Amkha's account was so disjointed that the Army attaché doubted if the 2d Parachute Battalion ever reached the summit, and the general had not adequately explain how his men became entrapped. Apparently, the paratroopers expected the T–28s to kill all the enemy, leaving them only a leisurely walk up the mountainside to the top. Law later discovered that Amkha had turned down [redacted] artillery support for the advancing infantry, claiming the T–28s would suffice. It was the Army attaché's conclusion that after reaching the top and finding the communists very much alive, the 2d parachute battalion panicked and bolted back down the mountain. This was Amkha's "trap." Just the same, the neutralist general's somber mood could not be discounted. Law warned that one more unsuccessful attack on Phou Kout might spell the end of this phase of Operation Triangle.[75]

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(S) Law and Tyrrell believed a fourth ground assault on Phou Kout could prevail if it came hard on the heels of a T–28 napalm drop. Ambassador Unger was persuaded by their arguments. Dropping napalm might escalate the fighting at Muong Soui, but Unger thought it might deter Pathet Lao attacks in other areas, for example, an attack against one of the columns advancing from Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng. However, once the napalm genie got out of the bottle, Unger knew he would be under intense pressure to employ the ordnance elsewhere. Its use would also be grist for the enemy's propaganda mill—and even America's allies might see it as escalation. There seemed to be no clear-cut solution. Unger could only point out that Phou Kout was a military target and the United States controlled the napalm. Any future decision on its use rested solely with him and Washington. Having obtained Souvanna's assent, Unger meant to have only the most experienced Thai pilots deliver the ordnance. With these considerations, Unger asked for Washington's approval.[76]

(S) Before receiving Washington's confirmation, Unger attended a reception where British Ambassador Donald C. Hopson relayed his Foreign Office's version of a recent conversation on napalm held at the Department of State between Ambassador Denis A. Greenhill and William P. Bundy. At this July 22 meeting, Bundy told Greenhill that discretionary authority to use napalm was going to be given Unger in connection with the fighting at Muong Soui. Bundy stressed that this would not be implemented unless Souvanna said so, although the prime minister had previously agreed it should be used if needed. The targets, Bundy emphasized, would be strictly military with civilian areas avoided.[77]

(S) Ambassador Greenhill said napalm's use would do more harm than good. He recalled that Robert G. K. Thompson, the noted guerrilla warfare expert from Malaysia, had said that, in South Vietnam, it would be better for the Americans to allow the Viet Cong and Viet Minh to escape into the bush, than to take the chance of injuring civilians with napalm. Greenhill underlined that the communists had already cranked up their propaganda machine and napalm had become a "dirty word." He did add that, since there was proper military justification and it was directed against military targets, dispensing napalm was understandable, especially if Souvanna agreed and was aware of its sensitivity. He cautioned that any military advantage must

74. (S) Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-334, Jul 28, 1964.
75. (S) *Ibid.*
76. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 145, Jul 23, 1964.
77. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 152, Jul 23, 1964, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 73, Jul 22, 1964.

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always be weighed against possible harm to civilians. Bundy concurred—this was the sole basis on which the United States would consider its use.[78]

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(S) Bundy gathered from his conversation with Greenhill that the British did not relish the United States' employing napalm but would not object if the targets were military and Unger had Souvanna's permission. Apparently, this was not the case. To Unger's surprise, Hopson noted that the Foreign Office saw the same meeting as a statement of London's disapproval. They asked that their objections be conveyed to Unger because napalm was peculiarly American, and its use would highlight U.S. shipments of arms to Laos. ("This was the one weapon Churchill had always refused to agree to," Hopson said.) Even though USAF forward air guides would direct the strike and [redacted] pilots would fly the T–28s, the British did not believe [redacted] could be trusted to put the ordnance on strictly military targets. Finally, Foreign Secretary Robert A. Butler was on his way to the Soviet Union to try and convince Khrushchev to support another fourteen-nation conference on Laos. When he got to Moscow, the Foreign Office did not want Butler greeted with the news that the United States had dropped napalm. None of this impressed Unger—he was determined to proceed. He left it up to Washington to placate London.[79]

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

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(S) Unwilling to do this, the State Department restrained Unger after Ambassador Greenhill again voiced deep concern over the proposed use of napalm at Phou Kout. When State had given its basic approval for napalm a month earlier, it had considered such international repercussions and concluded that this backlash could be tolerated with Souvanna's approval; it acceded to British wishes at this juncture, since Foreign Office support was needed internationally. A recent Polish proposal for the three Laotian factions to consult prior to a new international conference on Laos was in acute danger of falling through. The United States sanctioned this motion; and Souvanna had gone along, provided the Pathet Lao withdrew from captured territory. (This stipulation was rejected by the Pathet Lao, North Vietnamese, and communist Chinese.) Nevertheless, Foreign Secretary Butler hoped to revive the Polish suggestion in Moscow, and Washington suspended consideration of napalm until the outcome of Butler's visit was known. Unger's instructions were modified: Napalm could not be dispensed without Washington's approval, except in an emergency or where a specific action already under way would otherwise fail. In any event, Souvanna's consent was also be needed.[80]

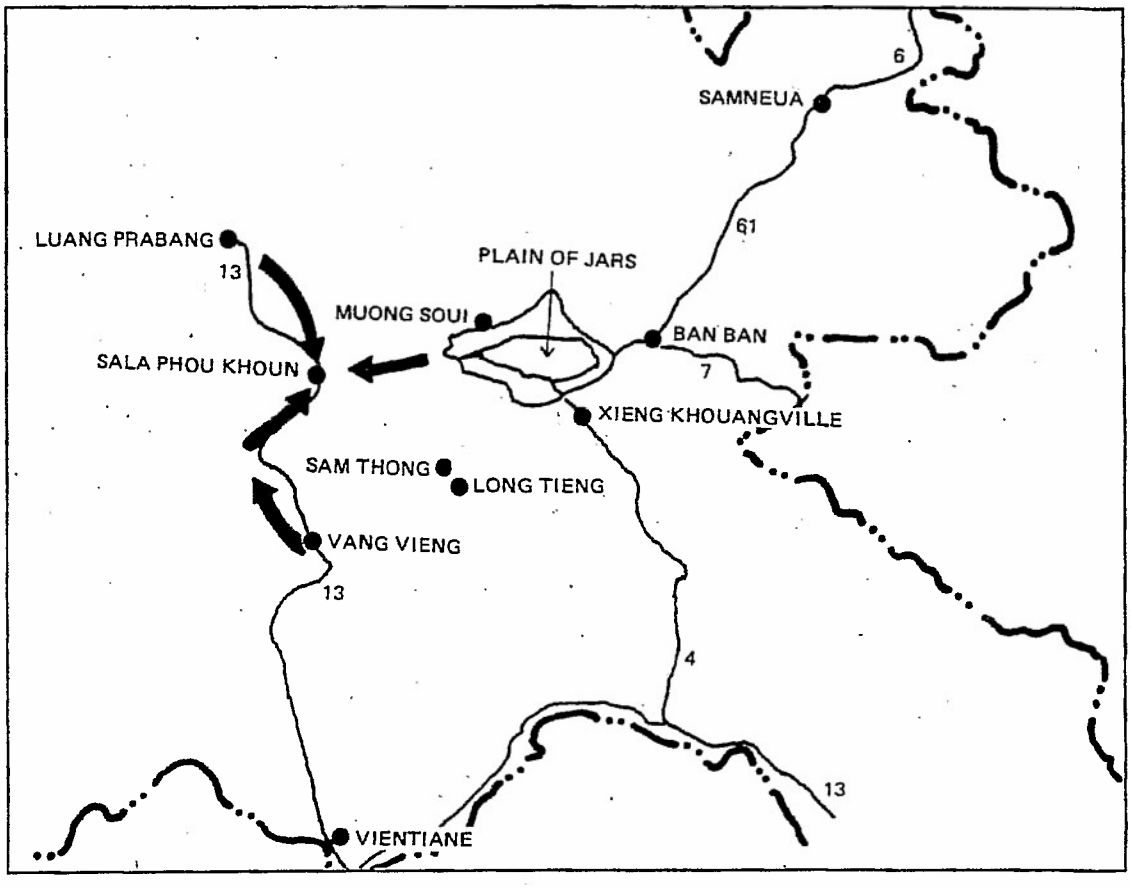
(S) Admiral Sharp, who became CINCPAC on June 30, 1964, following Admiral Felt's retirement, was displeased with this decision. From the moment he assumed his new command, Sharp had pushed for napalm and for USAF SAW pilots in combat, but this suggestion was again vetoed (July 24) by the Defense and State Departments. He argued that the T–28s were a deterrent, but they had not produced a decisive impact on Pathet Lao offensive operations. Sharp did not contend that the T–28s alone could defeat the enemy. Instead, he envisioned them tipping the scales toward the government, if allowed to employ the full range of weapons available, meaning napalm. Before bringing in U.S. fighter-bombers to knock out communist artillery and antiaircraft sites, Sharp urged "we give the RLAF a good shot at hacking it." This included dropping napalm on targets that could not be destroyed with iron bombs.[81]

(S) From Luang Prabang, Souvanna requested on July 26 requested that Unger release napalm to the RLAF so the FAR General Staff could plan its use in the fourth assault against Phou Kout. Citing London's objections and the current discussions in Moscow between Khrushchev and Butler, Unger demurred; and Souvanna withdrew the request.[82]

78. [redacted] Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 73, Jul 22, 1964.
79. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 129, Jul 21, 1964, 152, Jul 23, 1964.
80. [redacted] Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 82, Jul 23, 1964, 92, Jul 27, 1964.
81. [redacted] Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 240215Z Jul 64.
82. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 164, Jul 26, 1964.

(S) Meantime, the three columns of Operation Triangle were slowly and cautiously advancing toward their rendezvous at Sala Phou Koun. The columns were augmented with U.S. Army advisors (furnished by CINCUSARPAC from the 25th Infantry Division), USAF air liaison officer teams from Water Pump, and indigenous forward air controllers. The latter flew two U–17s from Muong Soui and Vang Vieng, carrying ground force observers in the backseats. The

Operation Triangle



FACs used ARC–44 and PRC–10 radios for air/ground communication but passed their air support requests back to the USAF ALOs by UHF radio or courier. The ALOs were equipped with vehicles, bilingual radio operators, and appropriate communications equipment. The ALOs accompanied the ground force commanders and relayed strike requests to Colonel Tyrrell by radio. He, in turn, He, in turn, maintained communication with the air operations center in Vientiane via telephone. From the AOC, the T–28s were fragged[83] against the FAC requests.[84]

(S) On July 25, at the height of the monsoon, there was an unexpected break in the weather; and the RLAF flew fifty-nine sorties against preselected targets along Route 13 as far north as

83. (S) That is, fragmentary operations orders were issued for these missions.
84. (S) Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to CHJUSMAGTHAI, 291149Z Jun 64, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 55, Jul 16, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 165, Jul 26, 1964; Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.

the Sala Phou Khoun road junction, encountering only light ground fire. It claimed sixty-six buildings destroyed after expending seventy-two 500-pound and fifty-eight 250-pound bombs and 318 rockets. Thao Ma then flew over Muong Kassy and reported drawing no fire nor seeing anyone. GM 17 occupied the town on July 30 without a shot being fired. That same day, Meo ADC (militia) units captured Sala Phou Khoun; five hundred enemy reportedly fled after token resistance. Phou Kout remained the one obstacle to a clean sweep by government forces.[85]

By August 1, word reached Washington that Foreign Secretary Butler was having no luck with Khrushchev, who refused to convene the Geneva conference on Laos. That being the case, Washington again authorized Unger to use napalm at his discretion after consulting with Souvanna and Ambassador Hopson. Colonel Law, Army attaché at Vientiane, was directed to explain the full military rationale for napalm's employment to the British military attaché. Nonetheless, the sixteen RLAF strikes on Phou Kout the next day relied on fragmentation bombs and .50-caliber machineguns—not napalm. Just three T–28s struck the mountain's summit, the pilots reporting no significant sightings or damage.[86]

Colonels Law and Tyrrell were briefed on the FAR General Staff's plan for a fourth try at Phou Kout on August 2. The plan had been drawn up before Ambassador Unger got the approval for napalm and did not include its use. However, it called for considerable air and artillery softening up on August 5 and seemed better thought out and coordinated than past failures. Right after the shelling stopped, for example, the 8th and 14th battalions would move out and up the hill. Colonel Law was unimpressed. He remembered that other attacks on Phou Kout had been preceded by heavy artillery and air strikes but had floundered because of the poor followup by government soldiers. He pessimistically predicted that, unless the Laotian infantry was prepared to close with the communists, no amount of preassault artillery or air bombardment would force them off the hill.[87]

As the neutralists were preparing for their fourth assault on Phou Kout, events took place in the Gulf of Tonkin that were to completely change the character of the war in Southeast Asia. Since April 1962, U.S. Navy destroyers had patrolled the waters adjacent to North Vietnam and China. These De Soto patrols had often come under air and surface surveillance during 1963-64 and once were buzzed by communist planes. On the late afternoon of August 2, 1964, radar aboard the destroyer USS *Maddox* picked up three North Vietnamese patrol boats closing at high speed. Their maneuvers showed hostile intent, so the *Maddox* fired three warning shots. When this did not deter them, the *Maddox* opened fire with its five-inch battery. One boat was disabled but not before it launched two torpedoes that missed the destroyer by one hundred yards. The second boat lost all power. Hit at least once, the third boat passed within seventeen hundred yards of the ship, spraying it with machinegun fire. About forty minutes after the action began, fighters from the USS *Ticonderoga* appeared and the attack ended.[88]

Washington's reaction was reserved, but the administration made it clear that another such episode could expect a violent reception. On August 3, the *Maddox* was joined by another destroyer, the USS *Turner Joy*. They soon noted they were under enemy radar tracking. Early that evening, the ships' radar revealed a distant surface contact paralleling the *Maddox*'s course. This shadowing continued until about ten, when the contact's pattern indicated it was positioning

85. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 160, Jul 25, 1964, 201, Jul 31, 1964, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX-494, 251310Z Jul 64, ARMA Vientiane to DA, 301050Z Jul 64.

86. Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 111, Aug 1, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 212, Aug 2, 1964; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: Status of Use of Napalm in Laos, Dec 11, 1964.

87. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX-362, Aug 3, 1964.

88. Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, pp 367-69. For a contrary view of this episode, see Joseph C. Goulden, *Truth is the First Casualty* (Chicago, 1969).

for attack. Fighters from the *Ticonderoga* arrived to support the patrol, and the *Turner Joy* subsequently fired into the darkness at the fast-moving targets seen solely on the ship's radar. The patrol then withdrew from the gulf's narrow waters. There was no damage or casualties.[89]

Admiral Sharp at once asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to authorize punitive air strikes on North Vietnam. Two hours later, the chiefs alerted him to ready a retaliatory strike for dawn the next day (August 5). That morning, as the planes rose from the decks of the *Ticonderoga* and *Constellation*, President Johnson announced the United States was making a measured response to North Vietnamese aggression. The strike—Pierce Arrow—was directed against the Vinh petroleum storage area and the bases harboring the enemy patrol boats. Twenty-five PT boats were damaged and the oil storage depots destroyed, with two planes and pilots lost, although one pilot wound up a prisoner.[90]

The Gulf of Tonkin incidents and uncertainty about reactions the retaliatory strikes would provoke led to a buildup of U.S. forces in Southeast Asia. Most of the USAF increase went to South Vietnam, although Thailand approved twelve more F–100s to supplement the six at Takhli and eighteen F–105 Thunderchiefs for Korat. On August 7, the RTG agreed the aircraft could launch from RTAF bases for combat operations "outside Thailand."[91]

As the Pierce Arrow flights hit North Vietnam, twenty-three T–28 sorties pounded enemy positions at Phou Kout. The neutralists pushed up the hill that afternoon, and early reports revealed they were making good progress. About two hundred feet from the crest, however, they ran into a mine field.[92] This roadblock, plus reports of heavy reinforcements, discouraged them from attacking. The RLAF responded with eighteen sorties against the hillside on August 7, but the neutralists withdrew from their most advanced positions the next day.[93]

After a visit to the area on August 9, Colonel Law concluded that Phou Kout would stay in enemy hands. The mines were a major obstacle, already accounting for 106 neutralist casualties. Even if the mines were cleared, it was unlikely the troops would advance. General Amkha and other officers were now convinced "a superior clan of spirits" were protecting the handful of North Vietnamese on the summit. They staunchly believed they were pitted against a supernatural power. Any soldier who deliberately killed one of the defenders (if indeed it could be done) would be rewarded by the personal vengeance of the demon associated with the victim. Realizing this would sound strange to Western ears, Law stressed he was not being frivolous or sarcastic. The belief in the supernatural was a way of life with many Laotians and could not be brushed aside. Moreover, Law doubted if rotating in fresh troops or dropping napalm would change matters. He suggested that napalm be withheld until there was some reasonable chance for its success. This would have a maximum benefit to the FAR and neutralists as well as an adverse effect on the enemy.[94]

Unger sided with his Army attaché. When Souvanna called in the ambassador later that day and requested napalm for Phou Kout, Unger said no. By then, most of the mountain was in government hands. Despite the reinforcement rumors, it was plain only a few enemy were left on the summit; but there was no assurance napalm would guarantee the mountain's capture because of the mines, barbed wire, and what Unger called "the psychological hazards." He did

89. ( ) *Ibid*, pp 369-370.
90. ( ) Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, pp 367-69.
91. ( ) Hist, 2d AD, Jul-Dec 64, p 68; msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 37, Aug 7, 1964.
92. ( ) Major Cochran, Water Pump commander, later recalled that the neutralists put one of their "deathless men" in charge of the attack. These were soldiers who had narrowly escaped death on previous occasions and were thought to lead charmed lives and be immune from bullets. At Phou Kout, one of these deathless men apparently stepped on a mine that blew off his foot and "everyone turned around and retreated [although] there was no one to bother them." [Cochran intvw, Aug 20, 1969.]
93. ( ) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 051110Z Aug 64, 261, Aug 7, 1964, 274, Aug 8, 1964.
94. ( ) Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CS-38294, Aug 9, 1964.

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not want the ordnance used inconsequentially but reserved (as Law recommended) for a time when it would make a deep psychological impression on the communists. Unger thought a renewed Pathet Lao/NVA attack on Muong Soui would be a more opportune time to dispense it, and Souvanna agreed.[95]

The situation at Phou Kout was resolved on August 18 when the neutralists pulled back from all previously won positions amid rumors that considerable North Vietnamese reinforcements were moving up. Despite Kong Le's assertion that the communists would now mount an all-out assault against his headquarters, the military situation stayed static for the rest of the month, except for the periodic artillery exchanges and T–28 sorties whenever the weather permitted.[96] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

As neutralist troops fell back from Phou Kout, enemy gunners on the mountain's western slope began taking a toll of low-flying planes. A T–28 was shot down, as was the Air America H–34 rescue helicopter. Both crashes were in rugged, heavily forested, and sparsely populated areas. An F–100 flying rescue combat air patrol was likewise lost—the first USAF jet downed in Laos—but the pilot was rescued after bailing out over Thailand. Ambassador Unger deemed the situation so critical that he ordered the two Air America and four T–28 pilots to fly cover during the second attempt to pick up the downed crewmembers. Since the heavy ground cover concealed the hostile guns and rendered normal fire suppression ineffective, Unger decided to use napalm. This momentous decision by the ambassador mirrored discussions with Tyrrell and other pilots. They persuaded him the only hope for rescue lay in placing napalm on part of the enemy-held ridgeline. There was no time for Unger to clear his decision with Washington.[97] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

Nevertheless, napalm was not dispensed. Air Force jets on rescue combat air patrol supplied sufficient suppressive fire, and the airborne rescue commander judged napalm unnecessary. Unfortunately, the search and rescue was only partially successful. The severely wounded and burned H–34 pilot was saved, but his Filipino mechanic was killed in the crash. After bailing out, they were last seen taking to the bush, and most observers feared they had been either captured or killed. Unger afterwards canceled the SAR, withdrawing the authorization for napalm and for Air America pilots in T–28s.[98] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

Two days later (August 20), another pair of T–28s were shot down. Unger instantly sought formal State and Defense approval to use Air America T–28 pilots in recovery operations. He argued that, without efficient search and rescue, the morale and effectiveness of aircrews would sag. Few would fly if they believed the embassy was not prepared to take all reasonable measures to rescue them once they were down. In addition, recent experience showed that the two crucial factors making or breaking search and rescue were reaction time—both of the rescue force as well as the enemy—and the coordination of the rescue aircraft. Apart from the professional USAF rescue force, Air America personnel were better suited for the task than the Laotians because they spoke English and could be properly coordinated by control aircraft. Therefore, Unger wanted discretionary authority to use these men whenever he felt they were indispensable to the rescue. He further promised to seek specific permission from Washington if time and conditions permitted. He also asked for standby authority to utilize napalm as a suppressive ordnance, provided it posed no clear risk to civilians.[99] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S) (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

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95. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 277, Aug 9, 1964.
96. Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CS-401, Aug 18, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 381, Aug 30, 1964.
97. Msgs, 3d TFW ADVON to JCS, 181535Z Aug 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 315, Aug 18, 1964, 325, Aug 19, 1964, 316, 317, Aug 18, 1964.
98. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 316, Aug 18, 1964.
99. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 325, Aug 19, 1964, 337, Aug 20, 1964.

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[redacted]

[redacted] Unger's dual request was staunchly supported by Admiral Sharp, the Joint Chiefs, and (to the surprise of some) the State Department.[100] On August 26, President Johnson assented to the use of Air America pilots if Unger said they were indispensable to the success of search and rescue, with the understanding he would seek advance Washington authorization whenever the situation allowed. No approval was given to employ napalm as a suppressive weapon.[101] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

[redacted] At the Secretary of Defense Conference held in Honolulu on June 1-2, McNamara had directed the Air Force to furnish five excess C–47s to the Military Assistance Program, Laos, at no cost. Admiral Felt suggested on June 10 that the transports, based at Tachikawa Air Base, Japan, be transferred to Air America until Laotian pilots and crews could be trained at Savannakhet. Ambassador Unger demurred: Air America's maintenance facilities were saturated and training inside Laos by the special air warfare detachment was forbidden by the Geneva accords. He wanted the aircraft handed over to the RLAF, but he admitted that the air arm could not operate or maintain them. Just the same, Thao Ma had sixteen pilots and fifty-two student mechanics available if training could begin in the next month or two. [redacted] This counterproposal was acceptable to Felt.[102] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

[redacted] Although this base was considered a poor choice because of crowded quarters and messing facilities, tents were a solution. [redacted][103] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

[redacted] Due to limited manpower, placing pilots in the transportation fleet crimped the T–28 program. At the end of July, the RLAF had just fifteen T–28 pilots, with five more scheduled to complete training [redacted] mid-September. Another four were undergoing training in the United States but would not finish until August 1965. This mostly exhausted the supply of potential Laotian T–28 candidates. [redacted] At this time, there were eighteen [redacted] with nine more entering Water Pump training in September. Even so, to keep a pool of twenty pilots, with tours averaging two to three months, a new group had to begin training each month. Moreover, since Water Pump was due to rotate back to Hurlburt in September, its deployment would have to be extended.[104] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

[redacted] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

100. [redacted] William P. Bundy was an exception. It was well known he opposed giving Unger standing authority to use Air America pilots. Incredibly, Bundy suggested using RLAF C–47 pilots instead. [Memo, William P. Bundy for SECSTATE, subj: Laos Contingency Action: For Your Luncheon Meeting with the President, n.d.]

101. [redacted] Memo, John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, to Sp Asst to the Pres for Nat Scty Aff, subj: SAR Operations in Laos, Aug 26, 1964; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 193, Aug 26, 1964.

102. [redacted] Hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 282; msg, CINCPAC to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, 100250Z Jun 64.

103. [redacted] Msgs, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 270715Z Jun 64, 290830Z Jun 64, JCS to CINCPAC, 262056Z Jun 64, USSTRICOM to CINCPAC, 302325Z Jun 64.

104. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 181054Z Jul 64.

105. [redacted] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

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The War in Northern Laos

[redacted] It was presumed the T–28 incommission rate would not surpass 75 percent, meaning that between twenty-five and thirty planes out of forty would be available daily. With a pool of twenty Laotian and twenty Thai pilots, the crew ratio was about 1.5, which was judged adequate for needs at that time.[106]

The June Secretary of Defense Conference had also considered reintroducing the Military Assistance Advisory Group into Laos as a way of showing American "intent." Ambassador Unger was opposed, noting that when the Programs Evaluation Office was changed to a MAAG three years earlier, the other side had been unimpressed, and reestablishing the MAAG would probably not sway the communists. The embassy was continually accused by the communists of hiding numerous military advisors; and consequently, Unger contended, the surfacing of a MAAG would merely lend credence to their claims, "not to mention putting the French Military Mission nose out of joint."[107]

Unger argued that, while U.S. Army and Air Force MAAG personnel did a fine job under trying circumstances in 1961–62, their experience showed it was almost impossible to put any backbone in the FAR. One military disaster after another only tended to rub off onto the Americans, and U.S. prestige was tarnished. Unger did not want this repeated and felt that it could easily happen as long as the North Vietnamese shored up Pathet Lao units. The best that could be hoped for was for Colonels Law and Tyrrell to continue giving advice, for Washington to keep up its MAP deliveries, and for Water Pump to sustain its highly productive T–28 training program. As then established, the Army attaché, air attaché, and requirements office staffs were ample. In summary, Unger argued, activating the MAAG would have no impact on the enemy, would violate the Geneva accords, and would tie American prestige to "an inept and uninspired army." After weighing the pros and cons, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended no expansion of the military assistance and advisory role in Laos. If U.S. aims changed, however, the chiefs said the question should be reexamined. Secretary McNamara concurred and all thought of reintroducing the MAAG at that time ended.[108]

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During the summer of 1964, the war in northern Laos underwent a series of escalations—some subtle, others violent. As if played on a giant chessboard, each move by one side was matched by the other's countermove, resulting in deeper American, [redacted] and North Vietnamese involvement. Yankee Team began as a modest photographic effort to counter the Pathet Lao's refusal to let Souvanna's government have access to its territory. This effort soon grew to encompass armed escorts, with new rules designed for the new situation. Escorts flew ahead of the photo planes, bombing and strafing to deter enemy flak batteries from opening fire. What originally started out as unarmed reconnaissance was, by mid-1964, one step short of being armed reconnaissance without the benefit of the cover of photo reconnaissance.

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This period witnessed a strengthening of ambassadorial control over U.S. military operations in Laos. Ambassador Unger, better attuned than his predecessor to military operations, proved more flexible in his dealings with high-ranking officers. He and Admiral Felt succeeded in resolving their differences and a harmonious relationship developed. The two also improved relations with the governments of Laos and Thailand; Unger nurtured a mutual trust with Souvanna, while Felt maintained close relations with Thai leaders [redacted]

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106. ([redacted]) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 165, Jul 26, 1964.
107. ([redacted]) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1628, Jun 15, 1964.
108. ([redacted]) *Ibid*; JCSM-574-64, Reintroduction into Laos of a Military Assistance and Advisory Organization, Jun 27, 1964; memo, ASD/ISA to SECDEF, same subj, Jul 13, 1964; memo, SECDEF to ASD/ISA, same subj, Jul 14, 1964.

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[redacted]

Early command and control arrangements for USAF units operating from Thai bases were unclear and at times conflicted with normal procedures. In theory, the 35th Tactical Group at Don Muang controlled all in-country assets as a detachment of 2d Air Division,[109] which in turn reported to Thirteenth Air Force. In reality, the command lines were not so precise. Although the Water Pump detachment received its maintenance and logistic support from the 35th Group, it was responsible to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI for training and to Ambassador Unger for out-country operations. Such an arrangement irritated the U.S. Army's Maj. Gen. Ernest F. Easterbrook, then serving in Bangkok as Deputy Commander, MACTHAI. As the senior American military officer in Thailand, Easterbrook believed he should control all U.S. military activity in the country. In February, he tried to get the special air warfare unit attached to him because of its training mission, but General Smart thwarted him. Smart contended that while Water Pump was charged with training, these activities did not fall within the charter of a Military Assistance Advisory Group or a Joint United States Military Advisory Group. The detachment's mission was closer to operations, meaning support for Ambassador Unger and the Royal Laotian Government. Admiral Felt sided with Smart in this dispute, especially after he realized the Air Force general had wisely enlisted the support of Unger, who also opposed a takeover of Water Pump by MACTHAI.[110]

However, there were signs that the conditions might change. Scrambling of the F–100s from Takhli on June 6 to rescue Lieutenant Klusmann pointed up the need to define more closely the command and control procedures. Although Ambassador Martin was able to placate the Thai over the incident, Prime Minister Thanom was disturbed over the multiplicity of command channels and the trouble he and other RTG members had in determining who was responsible for each U.S. military activity in the country. Martin attributed this confusion to the unilateral creation of MACTHAI by President Kennedy in 1962 after Phoumi's loss of Nam Tha. Its mission had been to handle the operations of Joint Task Force 116 and any future deployments of U.S. units. Army Gen. Paul D. Harkins, then COMUSMACV, was also designated COMUSMACTHAI. The Thai did not object because Marshal Sarit Thanarat liked and respected General Harkins. After the signing of the Geneva accords, the units of JTF 116 returned to their parent outfits, but the MACTHAI structure was left intact. Moreover, General Easterbrook, CHJUSMAGTHAI, retained the title DEPCOMUSMACTHAI; and again, the Thai did not object. The escalation of the war in South Vietnam during the next two years changed the situation, and the RTG became quite sensitive to any linking of activities in South Vietnam with those in Thailand. When President Johnson announced that Harkins would leave his Saigon post in late June, the RTG deemed it time to reexamine all command and control arrangements. By itself, the Thai proposal posed no insurmountable obstacles; but Thanom believed that all U.S. activities in the country should be concentrated under General Easterbrook.[111]

General Moore had been advised earlier of the Royal Thailand Government's attitude. On June 5, he proposed that PACAF establish Detachment 2, 35th Tactical Group, at Udorn as an "organizational vehicle" for Laos operations that would "preclude interference from MACTHAI and JUSMAGTHAI." The proposal included vesting operational command and control in an officer known as the Deputy Commander for Laos Affairs who would provide liaison, advice, and assistance to Ambassador Unger. Due to the rising importance of air operations in Laos, Moore suggested that a control and reporting post (CRP) and an air support operations center (ASOC) be placed at Udorn to provide the deputy commander a way to control

109. Besides Detachment 1 at Korat, the 35th Tactical Group governed the 331st, 332d, and 333d Air Base Squadrons located at Takhli, Ubon, and Udorn, respectively. Water Pump was supported by the 333d. [Hist, 2d Air Div, Jan-Jun 64, p 127.]

110. Msg, 13th AF to PACAF, 13 CCR-6-003, May 1, 1964; hist, 2d AD, Jan-Jun 64, p 123.

111. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2104, Jun 8, 1964, PACAF to CSAF, Jun 12, 1964.

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tactical operations. Secure communications would be set up to link the ASOC with the 2d Air Division AOC in Saigon, the AOC in Vientiane, and other Thai bases having USAF tenants. The deputy commander position could come from present 2d Air Division manpower authorizations, but Moore asked for twenty-four new spaces to man the ASOC. Under this plan, the 35th Tactical Group would continue to furnish administrative and logistic support to the new headquarters and USAF units in Thailand.[112]

PACAF approved the 2d Air Division proposal on June 7, but the move had to have RTG approval and had not been coordinated with the American embassy. When Ambassador Martin heard of the plan, he sent a stinging letter to Maj. Gen. Sam Maddux, Jr. (Thirteenth Air Force Commander and Moore's immediate superior) scoring the "back-door approach." Martin preferred a MACV-type organization, with the Air Force component commander in MACTHAI directing air operations in Laos. This, of course, would have placed General Easterbrook in the middle of the picture, a move the Air Force did not relish. To smooth Martin's feathers, Moore sat down with him and Easterbrook in Bangkok on July 9. He succeeded in convincing the ambassador of the need for the headquarters, along with the ASOC and the CRP. He promised both men closer cooperation between the new command and 2d Air Division on the one hand and MACTHAI and the embassy on the other. Martin next approached the RTG and secured permission to put the new organization at Udorn.[113]

On July 18, the 2d Air Division advance party reached Udorn. The former director of the Tan Son Nhut AOC, Col. Jack H. McCreery, was appointed Deputy Commander for Laos Affairs; and the 315th Air Division began airlifting the ASOC and CRP on the 21st. The move, completed within forty-eight hours, entailed twenty-one C–130 and eight C–124 flights, with over thirty-three tons of cargo and 145 passengers. On July 26 the ASOC and CRP were operationally ready and manned by members of the 5th Tactical Control Group and 1st Mobile Communications Group. (The air support operations center was really a tactical air control center, but because of RTG sensitivity to the word "tactical," the ASOC nomenclature was adopted.)[114]

When Colonel McCreery assumed his new post on July 25, his title was changed to Deputy Commander, 2d Air Division/Thirteenth Air Force. As such, he was General Moore's personal representative in Thailand to Ambassadors Martin and Unger. McCreery was first told to take operational control of all USAF units "in the area." On August 3, his command was confined to the USAF units based at Udorn; but for planning, he was prepared to assume operational control of all USAF units in Thailand and Laos. This additional control was only under contingency operations and exercised by McCreery through the 35th Tactical Group. The 35th followed up with a notice that it retained operational control of all USAF units in Thailand, except those at Udorn. The command limitations were soon made part of a 2d Air Division regulation detailing the deputy commander's organization and mission, but the new directive did not remove from McCreery's control any USAF unit in Thailand that supported air operations in Laos.[115]

As 2d Air Division commander, General Moore had this responsibility for all of Southeast Asia; but because of the expanding USAF role in Laos, a single agency was needed to control all search and rescue operations outside Vietnam. Although SAR in Laos was the exclusive domain of Air America, USAF aircraft were authorized to furnish rescue combat air patrol. However, at a June 15 meeting at Udorn, Air America officials said they were not staffed or equipped to

112. Hist, 2d, AD, Jan-Jun 64, p 123; Helmka and Hale, pp 9-13.
113. MR, Maj Gen Joseph H. Moore, Comdr, 2d AD, subj: Visit with Ambassador Martin and Major General Easterbrook, Jul 9, 1964; Helmka and Hale, pp 9-13.
114. Helmka and Hale, pp 10-12.
115. Msgs, 2d AD to Det 2, 35th Tac Gp, 250956Z Jul 64, 031108Z Aug 64, 35th Tac Gp to 331st ABS, *et al*, 071105Z Aug 64; 2d ADR, Organization and Mission-Field, Deputy Commander, 2d Air Division, Thailand, Sep 18, 1964.

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provide the around-the-clock, all-weather SAR that would be required with the increased air activity. Even now, normal airlift operations put the H–34s in the air from nine to eleven hours a day. Well-organized search and rescue, with helicopters on ground alert, would demand an increase in personnel and H–34s as well as an upgrading of the airline's communications network with expensive UHF equipment.[116]

This conference prompted General Moore to take several steps that eventually led to the creation of the first USAF search and rescue structure in Southeast Asia outside South Vietnam. First, he delegated his SAR authority for Laos to the new Udorn ASOC; and on June 19, he placed a small detachment of the 1st Air Rescue Squadron at the austere Thai base of Nakhon Phanom, a move that had been approved by the Royal Thailand Government on June 18. Known as Rescue 2, this unit had two HH–43B Huskie helicopters and thirty-six personnel. Its helicopters carried single-sideband (SSB) and UHF radios that could reach out 100 miles from their base on the Mekong River. Launch orders were issued by Tan Son Nhut's rescue control center, Udorn's ASOC, or the SAR commander. Rescue combat air patrol was flown by carrier-based A–1s standing ramp alert at Nakhon Phanom. To cover the Laotian panhandle, the Marines positioned two H–34s at Khe Sanh in South Vietnam. These helicopters had a 120-mile range, and their rescue combat air patrol was performed by carrier-based fighters on strip alert at Da Nang. For airborne control, an HU–16 amphibian was sent to Da Nang. This plane featured radar and UHF/VHF/SSB radios, and it had enough fuel to stay aloft all day. It orbited over Nakhon Phanom and acted as a communications relay aircraft during all missions.[117]

On June 20, the Royal Thailand Government granted PACAF permission to use its bases for search and rescue operations. Two days later, the Pacific Air Rescue Center at Tan Son Nhut worked out procedures for coordinating rescues between Air America and USAF assets. Under the agreement, Air America helicopters were scrambled either by the air attaché in Vientiane or by the HU–16. In every case, the procedures included informing both ambassadors whenever a search and rescue operation was needed.[118]

Militarily, there was a burgeoning emphasis on air power. The lamentable state of the Laotian government's troops, plus a growing tendency on the part of field commanders to call for air support in place of artillery, forced more of the strike burden on the RLAF and [redacted] pilots. That they could support ground forces to the extent they did, in the face of growing ground fire, can be attributed to the training and assistance afforded by Water Pump at Udorn. (b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA

Politically, the American position did not change. The United States continued to support the Geneva accords and the neutrality and independence of Laos. Souvanna's government was still seen as the only means through which this could be done. However, these goals were in conflict—Washington realized that to keep Souvanna in power, limited and carefully controlled departures from the Geneva accords were necessary. To achieve its main intent, the United States realized that some provisions of the 1962 agreement had to be set aside; but as Secretary Rusk noted, had the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese lived up to the accords, these limited actions would not have been required.[119] Furthermore, no moves were undertaken until alternate methods had been thoroughly explored, with Souvanna's views and desires always respected.

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116. Ltr, Dir/Current Ops, 2d AD, to Comdr, 2d AD, *et al*, subj: Report of Staff Visit, Jun 22, 1964; Anderson, pp 33-34; hist, CINCPAC, 1964, p 285.

117. Msgs, PACAF to 5th AF, 160942Z Jun 64; AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 217, Jun 18, 1964; Helmka and Hale, pp 119-121.

118. Helmka and Hale, p 121; msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 190336Z Jun 64.

119. Memo, Benjamin H. Read, Exec Secy, Dept of State, to McGeorge Bundy, White House, subj: Laos Situation, Sep 18, 1964; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 524, Sep 29, 1964.

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PART II:

The Quiet War, 1964–1968 (U)

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Chapter VI

Into the Shadow of Vietnam (U)

(U) In July 1964, the Defense Department began looking into ways of interdicting communist infiltration routes and facilities in the Laotian panhandle. This step was taken to sustain South Vietnamese morale and divert the Saigon government's attention from proposals to bomb North Vietnam with VNAF aircraft. On July 26, Defense proposed that single-seat VNAF A–1Hs or USAF two-seat A–1Es with American/VNAF pilots attack several military camps, barracks, and antiaircraft sites identified as potential targets. Twenty sorties a day would be scheduled from early August on, with conventional ordnance carried if napalm was politically unacceptable. The entire operation was to be justified on the grounds that North Vietnamese infiltration through the Laotian panhandle violated the Geneva accords.[1]

(U) From the start, Ambassador Unger disliked the proposal because it held little political or military benefit for Laos. The general feeling of Souvanna and his countrymen was that infiltration via the corridor was not their problem, even though it involved their country. The Royal Laotian Government's interest centered in northern Laos—the heart of the country—and the corridor was not essential to its defense. The Laotians viewed attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail as another instance of their country being dragged into a struggle between the big powers over a matter outside its prime concern. Unger thought that Souvanna would probably see the air strikes as endangering rather than enhancing his political position. More important, like the French, he believed the United States was fighting an unwinnable war in South Vietnam. If the administration wanted to up the ante, Unger thought Souvanna would applaud the interdiction of Route 7, open support for Operation Triangle, help in retaking the Plain of Jars, and he might even suggest U.S. air power hit Hanoi—the root of the problem.[2]

(U) Additionally, Unger saw American napalm policy as contradictory. In the past, Washington had shied away from using the ordnance because of international repercussions or the risk of escalation. In fact, on instructions from Bundy, Unger had turned down Souvanna's request to drop napalm at Phou Kout. Although the ambassador had no quarrel with this decision, he called attention to Defense's proposal to employ it in the corridor but not in an area Souvanna considered vital.[3]

(U) Unger was also worried that the trail strikes would harm Washington's long-range political objectives in Laos, and end forever the facade of American support for the Geneva accords. However, he admitted the United States would not be alone, since there were no signs the Pathet Lao or North Vietnamese were willing to live by the accords either. The administration had hoped the careful application of stronger military measures would stop nibbling, but it obviously had not. If bombing the trail failed to halt infiltration, Unger wondered if the next step would be the introduction of American ground troops. He concluded by pointing out that Souvanna's permission for the Air Force and VNAF to attack these targets would be given only on condition he received adequate support for northern Laos in return.[4]

1. (U) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 89, Jul 26, 1964.
2. (U) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 170, Jul 27, 1964.
3. (U) *Ibid.*
4. (U) *Ibid.*

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The War in Northern Laos

(S) By mid-August, corridor planning had progressed to the point that a coordination meeting was needed between the three Southeast Asia ambassadors, their staffs, and appropriate military commanders.[5] The conference convened at Udorn on August 18. The revised plan replaced the VNAF A–1s with RLAF T–28s because an enthusiastic Thao Ma had privately assured Gen. William C. Westmoreland, USA, the new COMUSMACV, that his pilots could hit the twenty targets selected. The RLAF air chief figured it would take ten days using the ten Savannakhet-based T–28s. However, the conferees were concerned that some of the targets were too well protected by antiaircraft guns for a T–28 to successfully attack. Unger and Tyrrell agreed to go over the list and sort out those they thought Thao Ma's pilots could handle. The rest would be held back for Yankee Team "to eliminate during armed reconnaissance missions."[6]

(S) MACV's list swelled to forty targets in a little over two weeks, but the country team believed the RLAF could manage all forty since they presented less risk than those in northern Laos. The strikes would take twice as long, however, for Unger had ruled out [redacted] pilots, asserting they were vital to northern Laos and could not be spared. Since political considerations outweighed the tactical value, he also ruled out Yankee Team.[7] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

(S) Another meeting in Saigon on September 11 firmed up the corridor air plan. First, the conferees whittled back the list to twenty-two targets. Next, they suggested a series of sharp, heavy attacks by VNAF/Farm Gate aircraft to inflict maximum damage and to prevent the Pathet Lao/NVA from dispersing. However, if the goal of these air attacks was psychological, they could be spaced over several weeks and split between the RLAF T–28s and Yankee Team. The latter would go after the hardest targets—five bridges—under the "suppressive fire" cover since all five had antiaircraft sites within ten to fifteen miles. The remaining seventeen were delegated to the RLAF. Because Ambassador Unger favored the psychological objective, the conference estimated that 188 T–28 and 80 USAF Yankee Team sorties over twelve days would be needed. Napalm would not be dropped.[8]

(S) Unger was not enthusiastic about using USAF planes on the trail but, after listening to Tyrrell and other airmen, changed his mind. He likewise concurred in the MACV list but said the projected sortie level was too high. For example, twenty-five aircraft against a single bridge did not fit the category of a "suppressive strike." Such a mission would merely frighten the Laotians and could jeopardize the entire Yankee Team concept. A sustained, widespread harassment over a longer period would do more to keep the enemy off-balance than a quick, large-scale destruction of a few military strongpoints. Unger felt that Souvanna did not have to be told Yankee Team was now a strike operation, if the number of planes stayed at the present level. He thought a flight of four "escorts" could readily be passed off as a "suppressive strike."[9]

(S) After reviewing the MACV target list, the State and Defense Departments instructed Unger to seek Souvanna's permission for the corridor strikes, using primarily the RLAF T–28s. As the operation unfolded, Yankee Team would be brought in to hit the more difficult and lucrative targets.[10]

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5. (S) Vientiane was represented by Unger, Tyrrell, Law, and [redacted] Martin, Easterbrook, McCoskrie, and the embassy political counselor flew up from Bangkok. U. Alexis Johnson, William H. Sullivan, [redacted] attended from Saigon, along with Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor and General Westmoreland. (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

6. (S) Msg, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 485, Aug 20, 1964.

7. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 423, Sep 7, 1964, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 197, Aug 29, 1964.

8. (S) Msg, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 913, Sep 19, 1964.

9. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 448, Sep 13, 1964, 486, Sep 22, 1964.

10. (S) Memo, Benjamin H. Read, Exec Secy, Dept of State, to McGeorge Bundy, White House, subj: Laos Situation, Sep 18, 1964; msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 275, Sep 25, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 524, Sep 29, 1964.

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(S) Unger met with Souvanna on September 29 and discussed the planned corridor strikes with Thao Ma's T–28s. The Prime minister wanted to interdict Route 7 in lieu of hitting the trail. He feared the Pathet Lao would kick off a major offensive against Kong Le at Muong Soui once the roads dried. Unger explained that the panhandle program would not draw sorties away from the north, [redacted] If more sorties were needed to protect Kong Le, he would furnish them. Besides, the ambassador added, the North Vietnamese had been using the trail too long in violation of the Geneva accords. It was time they learned they could no longer do this with impunity. Souvanna acceded, but he stipulated that every target must be cleared by the FAR General Staff and that care be taken to avoid civilian areas. Unger assented but did not mention USAF Yankee Team participation because he considered "suppressive action in [the] course of such strikes a matter on which we already have Souvanna's concurrence."[11] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

(S) The T–28 fleet available numbered thirty-three. Ten were usually based at Savannakhet under Thao Ma's control,[12] but they often were shuttled to Wattay for strikes in northern Laos. The remainder (twenty T–28s and three RT–28s) [redacted] were used for special air warfare training [redacted] At this point, Thao Ma said he would need fifteen T–28s for the corridor instead of ten. The balance could come only from the [redacted] pool; but with three T–28s down for maintenance, the air operations center had just fifteen planes to schedule each day. Since he had promised Souvanna more sorties in the north if called for, Unger asked General Moore for all T–28s above VNAF needs. Despite their severe G-force limits that barred such combat maneuvers as dive bombing, he would accept RT–28s and exchange them for Water Pump's attack models.[13] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S) (b) (b) (S) (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

(S) Secretary McNamara had earlier been told of the worldwide T–28 shortage. On August 14, he ordered the Air Force to take twenty of the trainers out of storage and convert them to fighters at a cost of $169,000 each. Eight days later, President Johnson decided to give Military Assistance Program, Laos, ten of these planes and give Air America five more H–34s for the search and rescue force. However, none of these planes would be ready until early in 1965, and Unger's T–28 request had to be weighed by Washington against other priorities. Inevitable delays ensued.[14] NLL C/A

(S) The T–28s were not the ambassador's sole concern. Souvanna was still afraid the Pathet Lao would attack Kong Le at any moment. The keys to a communist offensive were the supplies they had on hand and their capability to replenish those supplies; and to allay the prime minister's fears, Unger now pressed Washington to permit USAF F–100s and F–105s to attack targets in northern Laos, mainly along Route 7. The Ban Ken bridge, where Route 7 crossed the Mat River at the eastern end of the Ban Ban Valley was picked as an ideal bottleneck target. Unger knew that committing USAF jets would deepen American military involvement and run a higher political risk. Just the same, he strongly hinted that the United States was obliged to make this strike since Souvanna had approved the corridor assaults.[15]

(S) President Johnson then upset corridor air planning: even though he wanted the panhandle strikes started as soon as possible, Johnson disapproved Yankee Team participation in either a

11. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 524, Sep 29, 1964, 531, Sep 29, 1964.
12. (S) Thao Ma's T–28s were composed of the six given the RLAF by Chadbourn between July and August 1963 and the four "on loan" from Water Pump since May 18, 1964 (not part of the RLAF T–28 inventory).
13. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 550, Oct 1, 1964, AIRA Bangkok to 2d AD, C–0113, 240330Z Sep 64.
14. (S) Msgs, ASD/ISA to CINCPAC, 260015Z Sep 64, CINCPAC to ASD/ISA, 030446Z Oct 64; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to John T. McNaughton, ASD/ISA, subj: Helicopter Requirements in Laos, Sep 12, 1964.
15. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 550, Oct 1, 1964.

[redacted]

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suppressive or air cover role. With no firm evidence that Hanoi was planning new attacks on Kong Le, the President held back USAF jet operations against Route 7 or the Ban Ken bridge. On October 7, the State Department told Unger that American participation would be limited to escorted photo-reconnaissance missions.[16]

(S) By coincidence, the Coordinating Committee for United States Missions Southeast Asia (SEACOORD) held its first organizing session the day after Unger received his instructions from Washington. This group was the brainchild of General Taylor, former U.S. Army chief of staff and American Ambassador to Vietnam since July. In mid-September, Taylor concluded that the conflicts in Laos and South Vietnam could no longer be kept separate; they were both part of a larger Southeast Asia war. He thought a council of high U.S. civil and military authorities, including the CIA and CINCPAC, should regularly gather to discuss and iron out problems the country team would soon be facing. In addition, the committee would suggest to Washington possible U.S. courses of action in Southeast Asia. Strongly backed by Ambassadors Unger and Martin, SEACOORD was approved on October 7, 1964.[17]

(S) Within SEACOORD the opinion was unanimous: the corridor strikes could have the desired political and psychological effect only if the United States joined in. Washington had pushed for this operation, and backing out now would strain its relations with Laos. Moreover, if the Laotians had to go it alone, this could well be the end to the air program. Unger was aware that Thao Ma's early, bubbling support would turn to deep gloom once the RLAF suffered a few losses. More important, if Yankee Team did not join in, the vital infiltration targets would go untouched. The committee was also puzzled over President Johnson's withholding USAF fighter cover for the T-28s, even though the rules of engagement let U.S. planes intercept communist MiGs over Laos. Accordingly, SEACOORD asked the President to lift his restrictions on American involvement.[18]

(S) The Joint Chiefs, Admiral Sharp, and General Westmoreland championed these views. Nevertheless, President Johnson agreed only to the MiG combat air patrol and emphasized that the combat air patrol would not suppress or retaliate against ground fire unless assisting in search and rescue. At the same time, Unger was informed that Yankee Team corridor strikes were still included in the overall planning and that approval would soon be granted [after the upcoming election?]. In the interim, American operations were confined to photo reconnaissance and MiG combat air patrol.[19]

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA

(S) Starting on October 13, the RLAF worked central and southern Laos [redacted] flew from twelve to eighteen sorties a day in the north, mostly in support of Meo and FAR operations near Tha Thom. This was the only action in the region, since the anticipated enemy offensive against Kong Le at Muong Suoi had not yet begun. On October 23 [redacted] reported that, in the preceding ten days, nearly 250 westbound trucks had been counted on Route 7. The communists were plainly quickening their reinforcement and resupply of positions on the plain and at Tha Thom. Colonel Tyrrell wanted [redacted] to crater the road in carefully selected areas free of enemy antiaircraft fire and the Meo teams to begin small minelaying forays at scattered points. The country team wanted a USAF interdiction strike on the Ban Ken bridge instead of this limited harassment, but permission was not forthcoming.[20]

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA — CIA & STATE — (b)(1) (b)(1) (b)(3) (b)(3) (S) (S) CIA

16. (S) Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 313, Oct 7, 1964.
17. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 870, Sep 16, 1964, 1017, Oct 2, 1964, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 478, Sep 21, 1964, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 21, Sep 21, 1964, SECSTATE to AmEmb Saigon, 727, Sep 25, 1964, 783, Oct 7, 1964.
18. (S) Msg, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 1068, Oct 9, 1964.
19. (S) Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 9578, 132204Z Oct 64, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 121657Z Oct 64, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 330, Oct 13, 1964.
20. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 665, Oct 23, 1964.

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[redacted]

(S) On October 27, Tyrrell received an overlay of the FAR General Staff's Operation Anniversary Victory in which the Meo planned to recapture several Pathet Lao strongholds east and south of Xieng Khouangville, relieving pressure on Tha Thom. Enemy strength was put at eight battalions—two North Vietnamese. Vang Pao had ten battalions—nine Meo and one FAR. The plan included [redacted] T–28 flights starting the next day, with the pilots switching operations on November 3 to Military Region II headquarters at Paksane [redacted] SAW ground support personnel were to shuttle from Vientiane in the same manner. To control the air strikes, the Laotians consented to furnish indigenous forward air controllers familiar with the region. Tyrrell estimated that fifteen sorties a day could be flown using the six T–28s on hand; but if the Pathet Lao attacked Kong Le at Muong Soui, the aircraft were to be diverted to assist him.[21] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

(S) The shortage of T–28s had concerned Unger and Tyrrell earlier; and along with the trail strikes, Anniversary Victory required support. These actions, in time, stretched T–28 assets thin. In late October, thirty-one of the fighters were available. Thao Ma had thirteen at Savannakhet, but RLAF maintenance was poor and the airmen were literally flying them into the ground. [redacted] three reconnaissance models and four that belonged to Water Pump. This left eleven T–28s, three that had been grounded for some time due to a shortage of parts. Of the remaining eight T–28s, usually two or three were down for normal maintenance. This pared the number available at Vientiane to five or six. As long as this situation persisted, there was little hope of the [redacted] pilots cratering Route 7, much less helping to defend Muong Soui. The ambassador again appealed to Washington for more T–28s.[22] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

(S) Unger also desperately needed RT–28s. He had three, but two were continually down for maintenance and needed parts. Since the end of September, he had been staving off Admiral Sharp's and General Westmoreland's persistent requests for Yankee Team to conduct escorted reconnaissance missions in northwestern Laos. The ambassador had agreed "in principle" to Yankee Team flying above latitude 20°N, but insisted that the flights be kept east of the Ou and Heup Rivers. In other words, he had no opposition to Yankee Team flights over Samneua but he preferred RT–28s in the provinces of Phong Saly, northwest Luang Prabang, and Nam Tha. Unger was even leery of these flights because they might be construed as a "provocative new step [leading] to reprisals."[23]

ALL CIA

(S) On September 27, MACV drafted a long list of reconnaissance targets that included six in Nam Tha and Phong Saly Provinces, some as close as ten miles to the Chinese border. A later list specified eleven missions, one within five miles of the border. General Westmoreland had a keen interest in the progress of Chinese road construction in the northwest. In January 1962, Souvanna had allowed the Chinese to begin building a road between Mengla and Phong Saly. After the Geneva accords were signed, Phoumi Nosavan, as deputy prime minister, visited Peking and verbally approved construction of other segments. The Mengla-Phong Saly section, which actually followed a previous road, was finished in 1963. Westmoreland now wanted an update, but Unger again told the MACV commander that missions over sensitive northwest Laos should be avoided as needlessly provocative.[24]

(S) The State Department concurred with Unger. Yankee Team missions over the area were banned unless reliable intelligence showed suspicious communist military movements or factors

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21. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX–896, 290930Z Oct 1964.
22. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 688, Oct 21, 1964, 698, Oct 31, 1964, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX–908, 301450Z Oct 64, Det 6, 1st ACW, to 2d AD, 040400Z Nov 64.
23. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 438, Sep 9, 1964, 693, Oct 31, 1964, CINCPAC to JCS, 032143Z Sep 64.
24. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 553, Oct 1, 1964, 642, Oct 18, 1964, PACAF AFSSO to DIA SSO 010215Z Jul 71.

[redacted]

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[redacted]

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CIA & STATE

the embassy was not aware of justified missions so close to China's border. SAC's U–2s or [redacted] (in this case, the Yao) were able to perform the task. Yet, State wanted Tyrrell to see if the RT–28s were available, suggesting the flights begin in northwest Luang Prabang and, depending on results, perhaps later extended into Phong Saly and Nam Tha Provinces. The Joint Chiefs of Staff subsequently directed Admiral Sharp to delete all Yankee Team above latitude 20°N from the schedule. MACV was told to draw up an RT–28 schedule for the northwest, but Unger had but one flyable RT–28—he needed more and quickly.[25]

Unknown to Unger, McNamara had approved the transfer of three T–28s and nine RT–28s from South Vietnam to Laos; but another week passed before this took place. On October 30, Unger said sufficient new pilots and mechanics had graduated from Water Pump training that he could support five more T–28s. The next day, Admiral Sharp ordered Westmoreland to transfer that number of reconnaissance versions to Vientiane. However, the planes had to be put in flying shape, and that took another two weeks. SAW detachment pilots were not notified that the planes were ready for pickup at Bien Hoa until November 18.[26]

SEACOORD saw this as only a stopgap allotment and called for still more T–28s at the November 5 meeting. After reviewing RLAF accomplishments in the corridor, the members concluded that, although serious damage had been inflicted on several targets, ten had only been lightly bombed and needed to be hit again. Furthermore, Thao Ma had added eight new targets to the November list and scheduled over 450 sorties. The group determined that Admiral Sharp should ship in five more T–28s to meet these goals, but these aircraft did not arrive from South Vietnam until December.[27]

Meantime, Operation Anniversary Victory had run into unexpected snags. In preparing for the switch [redacted] to Paksane, Capt. Robert T. Schneidenbach, a communications specialist from Water Pump, had set up a rudimentary air support operations center at Military Region II headquarters. From there, communications were by SSB radio to Tyrrell's office and by landlines to the air operations center in Vientiane. However, Paksane was not used as a forward operating location because General Khamkong (Military Region II commander) failed to provide the forward air controllers or forward air guide/air liaison officer teams as promised. Ambassador Unger asked the air commandos to fill the breach as they had done in Operation Triangle, and Schneidenbach and a noncommissioned officer left Paksane for Tha Thom, joining GM 13 there on November 4. Over the next five days, the two men served as ALO and FAG, directing nearly a hundred T–28 strikes on Pathet Lao troops trying to take the town. The Pathet Lao were reinforced by three North Vietnamese Army battalions; and in a series of night and early morning attacks, they turned GM 13's flank. Tyrrell at once flew in an Air America plane to evacuate the USAF team. The T–28s continued to attack suspected enemy positions, however, and the ground situation eventually stabilized. Vang Pao did not achieve his objectives, but the NVA counterattacks were blunted. The Meo general later told Tyrrell that without the T–28s, Tha Thom would have fallen. He also reported that NVA units suffered heavy casualties from the air strikes and were badly demoralized.[28]

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CIA

In spite of these compliments, special air warfare personnel complained that the Laotians placed the same exaggerated reliance on air power at Tha Thom as they had at Phou

25. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 370, Oct 23, 1964, JCS to CINCPAC, 232200Z Oct 64, CINCPAC TO JCS 280340Z Oct 64.
26. Msgs, ASD/ISA to CINCPAC, 231950Z Oct 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 543, Oct 30, 1964, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 180715Z Nov 64.
27. Msgs, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 1415, Nov 6, 1964, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 010300Z Nov 64, Det 6, 1st ACW, to SAWC, 071000Z Dec 64.
28. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX–962, 110950Z Nov 64, CX–963, 110956Z Nov 64, CX–998, 191158Z Nov 64, Det 6, 1st ACW, to SAWC, 161050Z Nov 64.

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Kout. Too often, FAR and Meo officers used air as if it were a magic wand. After waving it over the battlefield, they would simply "sit back and wait for the T–28s to destroy the opposing forces." The air commandos believed that, in the long run, this would retard the proper development of the Laotian armed forces.[29] Time would show how correct their assessment had been. (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

On November 24, Colonel Law visited Muong Soui to observe the training of the neutralist gunners by the detachment, but Kong Le was more eager to show him plans for a new attack on Phou Kout. Intelligence reports disclosed the North Vietnamese had reduced their garrison on the mountain to two companies. With the odds in his favor, Kong Le thought the time ripe to retake it. The assault was scheduled to begin in two days, and he intended to lead it personally. From what he saw of the plan, Law concluded that it skimped on strike and airlift support, had not been coordinated with Vang Pao (who was to carry out diversionary moves), and depended too much on a "sudden surge of the Gung Ho spirit." Kong Le agreed to postpone the attack—but only for a few days.[30] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

The country team favored another try for Phou Kout, chiefly because the morale of the neutralists at Muong Soui had been boosted when Kong Le took personal command. The team was willing to furnish the needed air support and help redo the plan. The revision eliminated Vang Pao's role, replacing it with an envelopment from two sides preceded by heavy artillery and air strikes. The T–28s would bomb and strafe communist positions southeast of the mountain and be controlled by artillery spotters in L–19s. An attack from this direction was expected to meet merely light resistance. Once the base of the hill was secure, the neutralists intended to go up the east slope, the same route the Pathet Lao had taken to seize the summit. Law warned it would not be easy; and unless the neutralists were willing to close with the enemy, the results in the end would be a failure as before.[31] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

On December 1, twelve sorties, directed by the artillery spotters, hit the mountain with fragmentation bombs and five-hundred-pound high-explosive bombs. The pilots reported large bunkers and numerous foxholes, but no enemy. The pilots had not been fired upon, and the mountain seemed deserted. Kong Le knew nothing of this, however, as he had retired to a Buddhist retreat (a cave nearby) to do penance and "assure the success of the attack." After approving the revised plan and agreeing to lead the troops, he had turned the operation over to a subordinate, Col. Somboun Vongphrachanh. Although Law was quite upset over Kong Le's last minute "tackling of the psychic," there was little he could do.[32] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

ALL CIA

The next day, nine T–28s hit Phou Kout and five neutralist battalions moved out, easily occupying the preliminary objective at the base of the mountain. On December 3, the neutralists began working their way up the east slope as the T–28s continued to strike suspected enemy positions. By the middle of the afternoon, one of the minor peaks near the mountain's summit fell to the neutralists. When word reached Colonel Somboun's headquarters, it touched off intense but short-lived jubilation, for at this point, the troops began to mill around and failed to press home the attack. Further, those at the bottom of the mountain did not put out patrols.[33]

The North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao counterattacked on December 4, hitting the infantry on the captured peak with 82-mm recoilless rifle fire and forcing their withdrawal back

29. (S) Msg, Det 6, 1st ACW, to SAWC, 161050Z Nov 64.
30. (S) Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX–618, 241100Z Nov 64.
31. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 804, Nov 25, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX–619, 251040Z Nov 64.
32. (S) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX–1059, 301200Z Nov 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 324, Dec 1, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX–664, 031415Z Dec 64.
33. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 828, Dec 2, 1964, 835, Dec 3, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX–648, 061050Z Dec 64.

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down the slope. The enemy brought up tanks the next day and, from positions in the nearby woods, fired over 130 rounds into neutralist positions, destroying a 105-mm howitzer with a direct hit. By dusk, Kong Le's men had suffered twelve killed and sixty-eight wounded. At first, the [redacted] FACs could not find the enemy armor that continuously changed locations; but on December 6, they spotted the tanks near the edge of the woods and the T–28s destroyed four of them. Neutralists monitoring the radio heard the Pathet Lao say their commander and several of his staff had been killed by the air strike.[34]

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(S) The next few days were quiet. The T–28s made only occasional strikes into the woods due to the hot antiaircraft fire. There was no reaction until December 10, when a North Vietnamese battalion suddenly pounced on the unwary neutralists, who beat a hasty retreat to Muong Soui. Kong Le now emerged from his meditations and sacked Colonel Somboun, but not for failing to take Phou Kout. Instead, the Laotian colonel was replaced because he was suspected of embezzling 1.5 million kip[35] in troop funds.[36]

(S) On December 1, President Johnson had approved a series of military measures designed to signal U.S. willingness to use force to counter further aggression from Hanoi. As an adjunct to this plan, which was concerned mainly with South Vietnam, he authorized USAF and Navy planes to fly armed reconnaissance missions over Laos.[37]

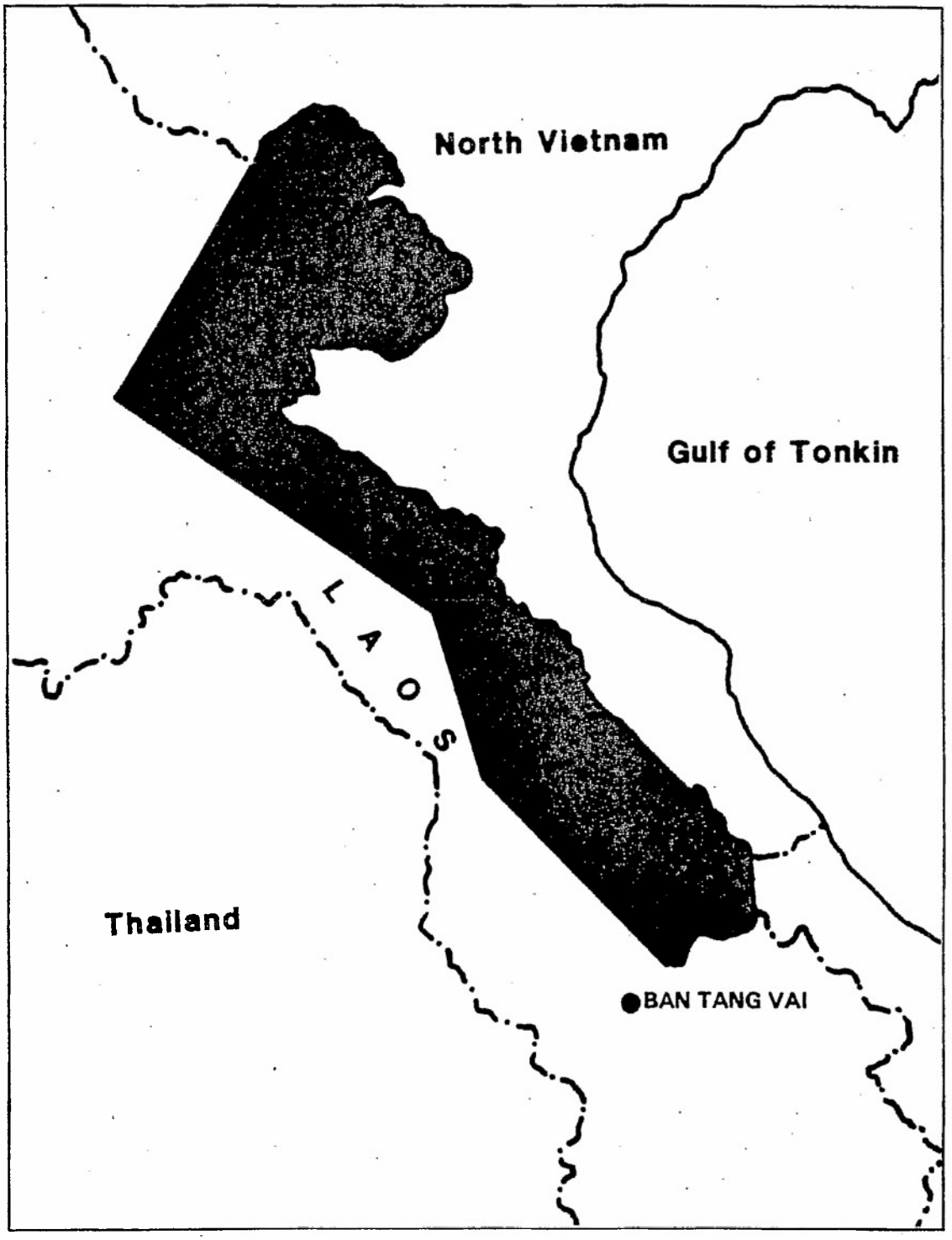
(S) At the same time, Ambassador Unger departed Vientiane for his new post in Washington as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. His replacement was William H. Sullivan, another Asian expert and protege of Averell W. Harriman. As special assistant to Secretary Rusk, Sullivan had chaired the Vietnam working group, an interdepartmental committee for handling all Vietnam planning and activities. On December 10, even before he formally presented his credentials to the king, Sullivan discussed the administration's new bombing program with Souvanna and sought the prime minister's approval of that program.[38]

(S) The prime minister's reaction to increased air operations against the North Vietnamese was termed "excellent" by the new ambassador. Souvanna approved armed reconnaissance in the panhandle and, as he had done with Unger, asked that Yankee Team conduct similar flights along Route 7 in the Plain of Jars. When Sullivan asked him if he really understood the meaning of "armed reconnaissance," the prince replied that when American aircrews "see anything moving on the road, either day or night, attack it." He did object, however, to Sullivan's suggestion that the United States inject more candor in its public statements on air operations in Laos. He held to his position that actions speak louder than words, "and in this instance, we should let the action speak for us."[39]

(S) Back in Washington, Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus R. Vance presented the JCS armed reconnaissance program, termed Barrel Roll, to the National Security Council on December 12. McGeorge Bundy of the White House staff said it "fulfilled precisely the President's wishes;" and barring notice to the contrary, operations should start immediately. Napalm was deleted, however; all concurred that the RLAF should dispense it first. Further, in deference to Souvanna, public statements were limited to just those instances when an aircraft was lost and spokesmen were to refer to the flights as escorted reconnaissance missions

34. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 841, Dec 4, 1964, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX–648, 061050Z Dec 64, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, CX–1088, 070502Z Dec 64.
35. (S) The kip is the basic monetary unit of Laos.
36. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 860, Dec 8, 1964, 869, Dec 10, 1964, DIA to AIG 623, *et al*, 140533Z Dec 64.
37. (S) *Gravel Pentagon Papers*, III, 113–16, 241–48.
38. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 868, Dec 10, 1964.
39. (S) *Ibid.*

Barrel Roll Area
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requested by the Royal Laotian Government. Finally, all flights were to be coordinated with Ambassador Sullivan in Vientiane. The first missions of Barrel Roll were flown against targets in southern Laos by the Air Force on December 14 and the Navy on December 17.[40]

On December 19, an interdepartmental meeting centered on the second series of Barrel Roll missions. The Joint Chiefs thought that, toward the end of this period, the attacks should shift from the corridor to Route 7. Since Souvanna had repeatedly asked the United States to interdict this road, the rest of the group not only assented but switched priorities. A west-east armed reconnaissance of a forty-mile stretch of Route 7 between Nong Pet and Nong Het, was set as the first strike of the second series (the third Barrel Roll mission), but it steered clear of the Ban Ken bridge. Nong Het was a main enemy resupply and transshipment point that contained a dozen or so storage buildings. A mountain trail led away from the area to the south, and Yankee Team photos showed a nearby corral enclosing what appeared to be pack animals. Still, of the four missions cleared for December 27, 1964 through January 3, 1965, this was the only mission that took in the northern section of the country. The weight of the effort fell on the corridor—a portent of future operations in Laos. Ambassador Sullivan approved this series on December 20. The 2d Air Division also received permission for an escorted RF–101 to accompany the strike force, flying below the established level of ten thousand feet if necessary for accurate bomb damage assessment. Yankee Team rules of engagement governed the reconnaissance planes and escorts.[41]

The first USAF armed reconnaissance mission in northern Laos (Barrel Roll 3) was flown on December 21, using four F–100s based at Da Nang for strike and two Korat F–105s for MiG combat air patrol. Route 7 was clear with no traffic seen; but immediately after the F–100s turned to escape antiaircraft fire at the Ban Ken bridge, the sky suddenly filled with intense flak and automatic weapon tracers. The jets dove on the enemy emplacements, splattering them with 20-mm cannon fire as well as cluster bomb units (CBUs). Several of the aircraft were stitched with small-arms fire but all returned safely to Da Nang. The Able Mable RF–101 flying bomb damage assessment was at ten thousand feet and reported several flak bursts below that altitude. Since the Voodoo was in no imminent danger, the F–105 escorts did not attack.[42]

For the week of January 4–10, a USAF night armed reconnaissance from Nong Pet to Nong Het was approved, and General Moore prepared to lay on the mission using a C–130 flareship and four F–100s. The latter were selected because the B–57 crews training at Clark for night operations were not yet qualified, but the selection of the C–130/F–100 team puzzled the PACAF commander, Gen. Hunter Harris, Jr.,[43] for the same reason. The F–100s at Da Nang had no recent night missions and the C–130 transport crews were just getting into flare work. The Hercules did offer superior operational advantages over the C–123 because of its navigational equipment, speed, payload, loiter time, and range; but to General Harris, there was no substitute for crew experience. His first choice was the A–1E/C–123 team, since it had clearly demonstrated its effectiveness in similar operations in South Vietnam. He also wanted an infrared-equipped RB–57 to be pathfinder of the mission. However, because of his firm belief that the operational commander was usually the best judge in selecting forces and tactics, Harris did not direct Moore to make the changes.[44]

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40. JCSM–1041–64, Operations in Laos, Dec 11, 1964; MR, subj: Meeting of NSC Principals, Dec 12, 1964, in JCS 2339/164; *Gravel Pentagon Papers*, III, 253–54.
41. JCSM–1050–64, Operations in Laos, Dec 17, 1964; msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 3081, 191725Z Dec 64, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 666, Dec 20, 1964, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 202243Z Dec 64, 2d AD to COMNAVFORJAPAN, *et al*, 070646Z Jan 65.
42. Msgs, 2d AD to JCS, 211040Z Dec 64, 211150Z Dec 64.
43. General Harris succeeded General Smart as CINCPACAF on August 1, 1964.
44. Msg, CINCPACAF to 13th AF, 2d AD, 060400Z Jan 65.

Moore did substitute a C–123 for the C–130 but the strike aircraft stayed F–100s. The mission was set for January 8 but was scrubbed two days in a row because of bad weather over Route 7 and the Plain of Jars. The weather also threatened two other Barrel Roll missions scheduled that week. Admiral Sharp wanted to fly them just as soon as the weather cleared, but he needed a waiver because of Washington's forty-eight-hour "sterile period" requirement between missions (hoping that Hanoi would get the signal). Sharp's waiver request was rejected, the forty-eight-hour rule prevailing. The Joint Chiefs did offer one concession. Missions aborted by weather could be banked and flown later if the forty-eight-hour order was adhered to.[45]

Several months earlier Ambassador Unger had urged a U.S. jet attack on the Ban Ken bridge, only to be refused by President Johnson. The JCS, in the first part of October, sent planning guidelines for a future strike to General Harris and Admiral Moorer. These guidelines specified the development of a plan to drop one span of the bridge on a single mission with a probability of success of 85 percent (a second try was not authorized if the target was not destroyed). The plans submitted by PACAF and PACFLT graphically portray the difference in tactical doctrine of the two services, even when using identical ground rules for the same target.[46]

The Navy's plan required about thirty A–4s and twenty A–1s accompanied by sixteen flak-suppression F–8s/F–4s—in effect, the strike complement of a pair of aircraft carriers. Moorer opposed using such a large force against a small point target that, at the height of the dry season, was expected to be obscured by smoke, haze, and dust. He preferred fewer planes and restriking if required to knock out the bridge. He further favored variable-fuzed, high-explosive bombs or the Snake Eye, a high-explosive (or hard) bomb with three retarders that allowed low-altitude release with enhanced accuracy. The plan specified a flak-suppression flight with conventional hard bombs and eight Zuni rockets. Moorer deleted napalm and CBU–2A, since delivery would have required the bombers to pass directly over the target at low level and because napalm's coverage decreased when release speed exceeded 250 knots. Both types of ordnance demanded multiple passes, and intelligence indicated thirty-four 37-mm/57-mm revetted guns within fifteen hundred yards of the bridge. Odds were quite high that several aircraft would be lost.[47]

PACAF originally planned for thirty F–105s since the JCS thought Ban Ken was a multiple-truss bridge. A force this size, requiring numerous passes over the bridge and its defenses, was unacceptable to Secretary McNamara. However, later Yankee Team photos showed Ban Ken to be a single girder bridge with two concrete piers and three deck-type concrete spans. Based on these photos, the PACAF plan was scaled down to twelve F–105s with four AGM–12 Bullpup[48] missiles fitted to each aircraft and eight F–105s with a mixed load of CBU and napalm for flak suppression of the antiaircraft positions, which were said to contain thirteen 57-mm guns. In contrast to Moorer, Harris believed a low-level, high-speed pass directly overhead was the best tactic, since it presented the most difficult target for enemy gunners to track. CBU was judged ideal for flak suppression, with napalm a "bonus ammunition" to be dropped on the CBU pass. Harris admitted that napalm "spread thin" in a high-speed, five-hundred-knot delivery. Even so, he thought that it was a good weapon against wooden targets and personnel and that it had a "high psychological factor."[49]

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45. ( ) Msgs, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 071144Z Jan 65, 081359Z Jan 65, 091141Z Jan 65, 2d AD to JCS, 080913Z Jan 65, JCS to CINCPAC, 092258Z Jan 65.
46. ( ) Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 9501, 062024Z Oct 64.
47. ( ) CINCPACFLT to CINCPAC, 072254Z Oct 64, CINCPAC to JCS, 121100Z Oct 64.
48. ( ) Developed by the Navy, the Bullpup allowed strike aircraft to "stand off" beyond the range of enemy small-arms fire. After launch, two flares in the aft end of the missile permitted visual tracking by the pilot, who used his cockpit missile stick to give steering commands. A radio receiver in the missile picked these signals up and guided the Bullpup to the target. In contrast, the Zuni was unguided after firing.
49. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 121100Z Oct 64.

These plans lay in limbo for two months. When Ambassador Sullivan stopped off at CINCPAC headquarters on the way to assuming his new post in Vientiane, one of the briefings from Admiral Sharp and his staff was on the Ban Ken strike plans. Sullivan withheld judgment until he had a chance to study them in detail with Tyrrell. On December 10, he opted for the Air Force plan because it needed fewer aircraft. This was in line with recent Washington thinking; but he balked at the inclusion of napalm as a "bonus munition," particularly when PACAF professed it had limited worth in high-speed delivery. Moreover, General Harris touched a sensitive nerve when he said napalm's introduction added a valuable "psychological factor." Sullivan asserted that it was precisely because of these psychological factors that the embassy in the past had vigorously resisted napalm's use. He would continue to do so unless dispensing the ordnance was dictated by valid military reasons in a highly critical situation. He wanted napalm excised from the USAF plan and contended that, if and when Washington ordered the strike, it should have "minimum exploitable psychological repercussions and should be surgically as neat as possible."[50]

Another month went by before Ban Ken was brought up again. In the interim, Ambassador Taylor had returned to Saigon from Washington and had briefed SEACOORD in early January on the various decisions associated with his Washington conversations. After reviewing all Barrel Roll missions to date, the group concluded that the strikes had done little to discourage communist insurgency or Hanoi's willingness to pursue the insurgency. However, they believed that the interdiction program (such as it was) had not been given a fair chance and favored an additional thirty days of "maximized performance" that included the long-sought air strike on the Ban Ken bridge. If it went down, the conferees confidently predicted that pressure on northern Laos would be relieved and that, in the end, fewer sorties would be needed in the area.[51]

On January 10, 1965, the National Security Council approved a mission (Barrel Roll 9) to be flown during the week of January 12–17 against the Ban Ken bridge. The order to CINCPAC specified conventional ordnance—not napalm—and skipped secondary targets. Nevertheless, due to heavy flak encountered by the December 21 missions (Barrel Roll 3), the strike force was expanded from the usual four bombers with two to four flak suppressors to a force of sixteen and eight respectively. It was also thought that, with the use of the larger force, Hanoi might get the "signal."[52]

Looking for convoy traffic to back up on Route 7 once the bridge was out, Moore and Westmoreland proposed a follow-on night armed reconnaissance of the road—the oft-postponed Barrel Roll 7. Both officers believed the possibility of such a lucrative target evolving after the bridge strike (now set for January 13) warranted waivers of the forty-eight-hour rule and the ban against overflying the Ban Ken bridge. Ambassador Sullivan and Admiral Sharp thought so too. While the idea was sound, Washington refused to approve two missions with less than forty-eight hours delay between them because two Barrel Roll assaults so close together would most likely blur the signal to Hanoi.[53]

The Ban Ken strike force, with sixteen F–105s, attacked the bridge as scheduled on the 13th. Ten planes were loaded with eight 750-pound bombs each, and six planes had two Bullpups and six 750-pound bombs each. Eight F–100s armed with CBU, Bullpups, and 20-mm guns flew flak suppression; and four F–100s maintained the MiG combat air patrol. For the first time, an

50. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 870, Dec 10, 1964.
51. ( ) Msgs, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 2077, Jan 7, 1965, 2086, Jan 8, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1030, Jan 11, 1965.
52. ( ) Msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV and CINCPACFLT, 100616Z Jan 65.
53. ( ) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1040, Jan 12, 1965, CINCPAC to JCS, 112000Z Jan 65, JCS to CINCPAC, 3681, 121618Z Jan 65.

RF–101 with a pilot who knew the area acted as pathfinder to aid in identifying targets. The two flights of F–105s, flying in loose trail, dropped fifty-two bombs on their first pass and destroyed the bridge. Only the piers were left standing, and most of them had the tops sheared off. The remaining ordnance was randomly dispensed for mopping up. Several passes were needed for the six F–105s carrying Bullpups. The dust and smoke created by the strike prevented accurate guidance of the missiles. Only one was fired at the bridge, and it scored a direct hit. The rest were directed to the enemy guns firing from a nearby bamboo grove. Unfortunately, an F–100 and F–105 making guided missile runs with the Bullpups were shot down. The two pilots—Capts. Albert C. Vollmer and Charles L. Ferguson—were later recovered by Air America helicopters and returned to Udorn.[54]

(S) Military authorities viewed the Ban Ken strike as enormously successful, hoping it augured future results. All agreed several important lessons were learned from the raid. The strike pilots, for example, recommended that, if this many aircraft had to be flown against a small point target, the time over target should be lengthened to allow more room for aircraft maneuvers, thus cutting the risk of midair collisions. However, the pilots questioned the use of the AGM–12 on targets of this type. All of the missiles had functioned properly, but the need for multiple passes increased the exposure of the delivery aircraft to enemy ground fire. General Moore strongly endorsed this view, saying that Vollmer and Ferguson would not have been shot down and the battle damage inflicted on the others might have been avoided if the force had withdrawn after the destruction of the bridge was confirmed. Last, the pilots pushed for an upward reevaluation of the damage expected when an aircraft such as the F–105 salvos six to eight 750-pound bombs. Not only could this destroy a bridge completely, the pilots concluded, but it would also be an excellent tactic for cutting or cratering roads and for the creation of rock slides and chokepoints.[55]

(S) Ban Ken also brought into the open for the first time that U.S. planes were doing more in Laos then merely flying reconnaissance. When several of the flak-scarred F–100s had to land at Udorn, a few State Department officials became worried lest someone spot the jets and the press begin asking embarrassing questions. Sullivan saw little chance of this happening. Although a few RTAF personnel had seen the damaged aircraft, the ambassador saw no cause for alarm since "their past record of taciturnity [was] impeccable." No Laotian had been told of the losses (Souvanna was visiting the king in Luang Prabang), and Sullivan concluded: "We are in a very sound position to stonewall this operation by our usual stance that we cannot comment on operational questions."[56]

(S) Sullivan had not reckoned with the Pentagon. The raid was barely a few hours old when Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) announced the loss of the two fighters. During the question period following the briefing, he declined to describe the mission the planes were on but admitted four other U.S. planes had previously been shot down over Laos. From "Pentagon sources," John W. Finney of the *New York Times* learned that "the flights had been on a strafing and bombing mission against the supply lines . . . used by the communists to supply their forces in Laos and South Vietnam." Mark S. Watson, the noted military analyst for the *Baltimore Sun* cryptically observed that "the F–105 Thunderchief was not designed for reconnaissance but the 'heavy business' of bombing." Both correspondents reasoned this clearly showed a stepping up of American military action in Southeast Asia and was not just tit-for-tat retaliation.[57]

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54. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1044, 1047, Jan 13, 1965, PACAF to CINCPAC, 131012Z Jan 65, 2d AD to JCS, 131055Z Jan 65, 131127Z Jan 65, 141946Z Jan 65.
55. (S) Msg, 2d AD to JCS, 141946Z Jan 65.
56. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1049, Jan 13, 1965.
57. (U) *New York Times*, Jan 14, 1965, p 1; *Baltimore Sun*, Jan 14, 1965, p 1. Put together, the two articles painted

Ambassador Sullivan was piqued over the briefing and especially the newspaper articles, noting they "will cause much pain here." He was chiefly concerned that the inability of Washington officials to keep quiet could ruin the Barrel Roll program and result indirectly in extensive future losses of American lives. He wanted State, Defense, and the White House to recheck all message addressees to make sure only those agencies with an absolute need to know saw the Barrel Roll cables. The need to maintain silence should be reemphasized, and "if there are still some who feel a compulsion to babble, we might be able to dissipate this feeling by letting them ride shotgun in our SAR helicopters."[58]

Whether Sullivan's forceful statements and suggestions had any effect on Washington is debatable; but the next day, down at the LBJ ranch, reporters asked President Johnson to spell out precisely the extent of American participation in the war in Southeast Asia. The President would only comment that it was public knowledge the United States was helping the Royal Laotian Government defend itself. Beyond that, he did not think it wise or desirable for him to go into exact details. He conceded this might lead to further press speculation, and if this was what the reporters wanted to do, there was little he could do about it. That same day, the State Department declined to say if the United States was still bound by the 1962 Geneva accords, while making it clear that the air strikes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail would continue.[59]

Despite the successful raid on the bridge, events in Laos were taking a turn for the worse. Around Samneua, the communists took several troublesome Meo enclaves, and all indications pointed to the beginning of the enemy's annual dry season offensive. On January 20 at Wattay Airfield, a disaster struck the RLAF's meager T–28 force. An electrical malfunction in a T–28's .50-caliber gun caused it to fire into the plane in front, detonating that plane's bombs. A chain reaction of explosions ensued; and before the damage could be controlled, nine RLAF T–28s and one Cessna were destroyed. Two C–47s suffered only minor damage, but the parking apron, a hangar, and three other buildings were torn up. Miraculously, there were no casualties. The loss of the T–28s was critical since they were helping Meo troops near Samneua hold their ground. Taking advantage of the turmoil and crisis, Phoumi Nosavan attempted his final try at a coup. On the third of February, Phoumi fled to Udorn, his march on Vientiane from the southeast foiled by Kouprasith Abhay's loyal troops.[60]

The forced departure of Phoumi left a void in the FAR military leadership that Ouane Rathikone, Kouprasith Abhay, and Bounpone Makthepharak quickly filled. Ouane remained Chief of Staff, holding sway in most of northern Laos, Bounpone and lesser officers took over Phoumi's area in the south, and Kouprasith solidified his control over Vientiane and the rest of Military Region V. As before, each general in the new troika retained his clan ties and interests while distributing the spoils to his followers. Each general remained suspicious of the others, and none of the three seemed strong enough to eliminate his rivals and unify the army.[61]

Meanwhile, the situation in Samneua Province worsened as the communist offensive intensified. On January 20, the Meo lost the key position of Ban Hong Non (Lima Site 86) to an estimated six to eight enemy battalions. At this point, Vang Pao surmised that the

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a reasonably accurate picture of U.S. activities in Laos during the previous seven or eight months. Among the items mentioned were the additional T–28s turned over to the RLAF, Souvanna's demand that secrecy be maintained, and that the recent upswing in military activity could be tied directly to Ambassador Taylor's early December meetings in Washington. The reporters erroneously described the raids as part of a systematic interdiction program designed to choke off the men and supplies moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

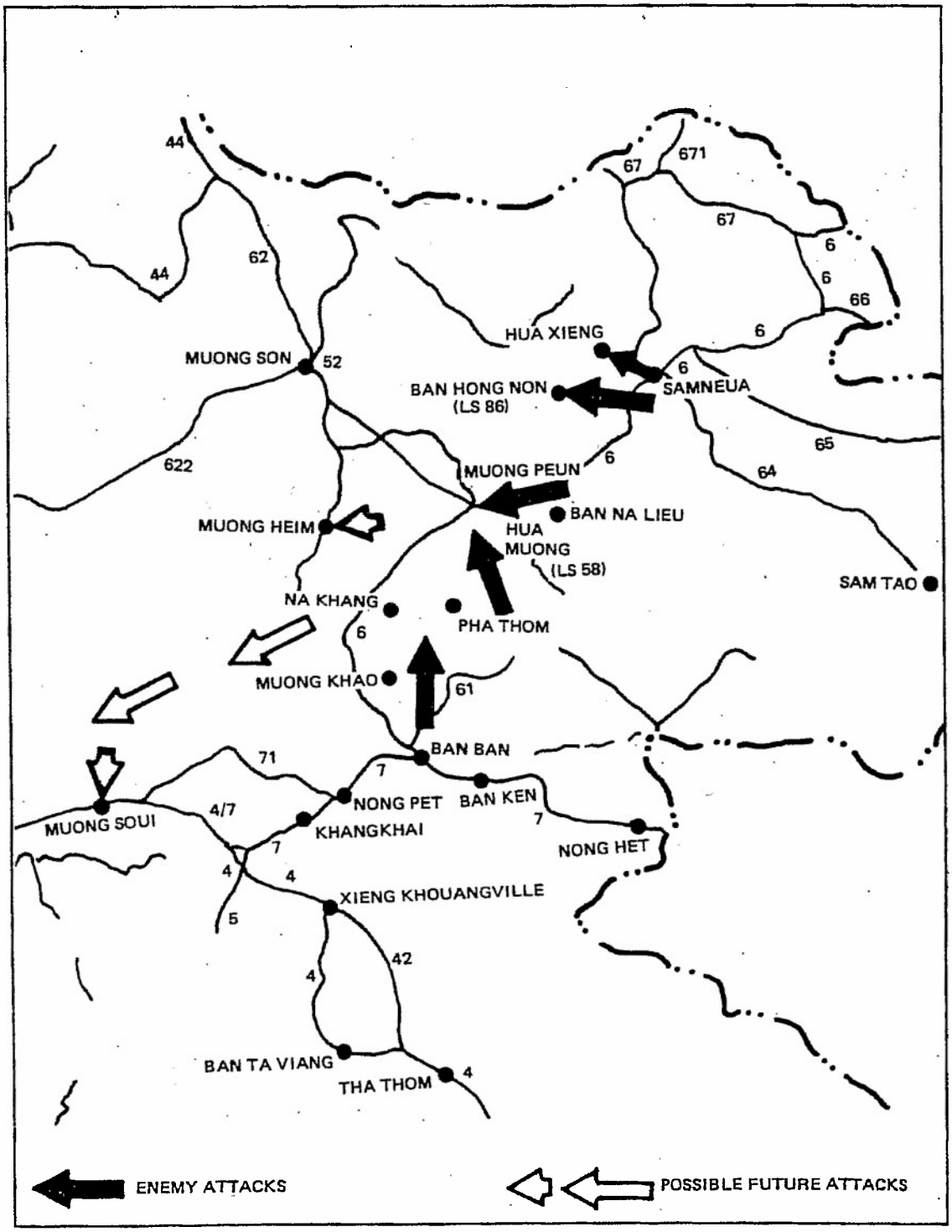
58. ( ) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1056, Jan 14, 1965, 1067, Jan 16, 1965.

59. ( ) *New York Times*, Jan 14, 1965, p 1.

60. ( ) *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 7–65, Feb 12, 1965; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1211, Feb 4, 1965.

61. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, A–125, subj: Indications of Political Shifts to the Right, Jan 8, 1965; Charles A. Cooper, *et al*, *Security and Assistance in Laos* (Santa Monica, 1965), p 14.

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[redacted]

communists' chief thrust would be toward Hua Muong (Lima Site 58), a center of Meo strength in the region. He figured the attacks west of Samneua sought to secure the communist right flank prior to assaulting Hua Muong.[62]

The fall of Lima Site 86, coupled with the accidental loss of the nine T–28s at Wattay on the same day, prompted Ambassador Sullivan to warn Washington that the Royal Laotian Government might ask for U.S. jets to strike Pathet Lao positions. The demand for deeper American involvement was averted when [redacted] which had continued to conduct over twenty T–28 strikes daily in the north, almost without interruption. When the enemy push temporarily slowed, the few attractive targets did not need a heavy dose of American air in northeastern Laos; but if conditions took a turn for the worse, Sullivan was sure the RLG would want USAF jets to hit enemy concentrations in Samneua Province. Considering the fluid situation there and to capitalize on fast-breaking intelligence, [redacted] he again proposed that future Barrel Roll missions be originated, planned, and coordinated from Vientiane.[63]

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General Moore endorsed Sullivan's suggestions, adding that the "ideal place" to coordinate USAF [redacted] and embassy planning was the ASOC at Udorn that belonged to the 2d Air Division's Deputy Commander for Laos Affairs. Udorn had the personnel to write such plans, the ASOC facilities, navigational aids, and the ground-controlled intercept site as supporting radar. These made the base a "natural focal point" for controlling out-country operations; and if USAF aircraft based in Thailand were authorized for strikes in Barrel Roll, their operational control could easily be vested in the deputy commander.

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ALL CIA

On February 5, Ambassador Sullivan and General Maddux, Thirteenth Air Force Commander, discussed the proposed reassignment of an RF–101 squadron to Udorn and upgrading of the deputy commander's headquarters. As early as September 1964, General Moore had urged that four to six RF–101s and appropriate photo-developing equipment be shifted from Tan Son Nhut to either Don Muang or Udorn. The purpose of the move was to improve Yankee Team operations in Laos above latitude 20°N. When Sullivan learned that a Voodoo could reach Route 7 in fifteen minutes from Udorn as opposed to ninety minutes from Saigon, he was enthusiastic about the transfer. This quick reaction coincided perfectly with his long-held tenet that, for Barrel Roll to be effective (and for Hanoi to get the signal), air power had to react to fast-breaking intelligence. Furthermore, the Chinese border was in range of unescorted reconnaissance sorties from this northern Thai base without refueling. The range of escorts, if needed, reached as far north as the 21st latitude, and air refueling stretched this to China's borders. These operational advantages and RTG opposition to placing highly visible USAF aircraft at heavily traveled Don Muang tipped the scales in favor of Udorn. The RTG approved the move on February 25.[64]

Sullivan's enthusiasm for the RF–101 shift did not extend to the deputy commander concept. He conceded there was much merit in placing more emphasis on the Udorn headquarters and that the MACV channel was slow and cumbersome. On the other hand, he did not wish to press the proposal for fear of antagonizing General Westmoreland. Besides, he contended, command and control were purely military problems that an ambassador should not meddle in. Nevertheless, he sent his lukewarm support for the idea to the State Department.[65]

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62. [redacted] *PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest* 10–65, Mar 5, 1965; msg, AIRA United Kingdom to CSAF, 201240Z Jan 65.
63. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1096, Jan 21, 1965, CINCPAC, 270531Z Jan 65.
64. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1229, Feb 5, 1965, 13th AF to CINCPACAF, 061544Z Feb 65.
65. [redacted] See note above; msgs, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 062055Z Feb 65, AmEmb Bangkok to 13th AF, SECSTATE, 1210, Feb 26, 1965.

[redacted]

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Regardless of Ambassador Sullivan's stance, General Maddux was not about to throw in the towel on the command and control matter. In his view, having MACV in the air request chain of command merely slowed things down and added complications, and he thought that General Westmoreland should concentrate on counterinsurgency operations in South Vietnam—a task his command was designed to do. Maddux strongly suggested to General Harris that all USAF operations in Laos (not just Yankee Team) be handled by the deputy commander since centralized control of air through this headquarters would speed up USAF responses to country team requests. The ASOC's communications net linked directly with 2d Air Division, the air attaché's office in Vientiane, and all radar sites in Thailand. In addition, Udorn was the ideal locale to coordinate Air America, [redacted] and USAF planning and to evaluate the results. After the RF–101s and the photo equipment arrived, Maddux wanted to set up a target intelligence section within the deputy commander's organization to work with Vientiane in developing targets. The Thirteenth Air Force Commander concluded his appeal to Harris by urging that every effort be made to encourage the embassy to work with the Udorn headquarters.[66] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

Meantime, Vang Pao's earlier prognosis that the main communist drive would be against Hua Muong (Lima Site 58) proved correct. In late January, the enemy began building up his forces and supplies north of Ban Ban along Route 7. By the end of the month, the communists were edging south via Route 6 toward Hua Muong. To halt this move, the Meo counterattacked at Ban Hong Non, recapturing a few minor positions; but in the space of three days (February 8–10, 1965), Muong Khao, Pha Thom, and Ban Na Lieu fell to the foe. This occurred despite seventeen T–28 sorties on February 10 that reported two hundred enemy killed and twenty buildings north of Ban Ban in flames. The enemy began to tighten the vise around Hua Muong with four to six battalions. On February 13, a convoy of nearly fifty trucks was sighted about twelve miles east of the of the village, but the attacking T–28s, [redacted] were driven off by heavy antiaircraft fire.[67] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

As the enemy closed in, Vang Pao (now Military Region II commander) ordered that the children, the sick, and the elderly be evacuated. Air America Caribous airlifted several thousand people to Sam Thong and Long Tieng in two days, and about six thousand more refugees fled westward into the hills. Colonel Law observed, "Military wives with five or ten kids just don't go alone. Husbands [also] take off." He proved correct—the Meo soldiers, unwilling to part with their families, abandoned their positions and drew back to Na Khang (Lima Site 36). The situation rapidly deteriorated, and on February 14, Hua Muong fell.[68] ALL CIA

The questions now were could Vang Pao hold Lima Site 36 and, if he did not, could a line of resistance be formed later at Kong Le's headquarters near Muong Soui. Law flew to the neutralist camp to find out if the paratrooper general was preparing for such a possible defense. He discovered the neutralists had done nothing; Kong Le was too busy haggling with his battalion commanders over finances, promotions, and who was to blame for Phou Kout. Unless something was done quickly, the whole Meo effort might dissolve, leaving the enemy perched on Kong Le's doorstep. To slow down the communists, Colonel Law urged the T–28s be augmented by heavy U.S. air strikes on Pathet Lao/NVA supply points along Routes 6 and 7.[69]

Sullivan concurred and on February 15 called on Washington to assign top priority to Barrel Roll missions in northeastern Laos. These would embrace not only armed reconnaissance

66. Msg, 13th AF to CINCPACAF, 061541Z Feb 65.
67. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 120645Z Feb 65, CSAF, 2072, 121204Z Feb 65, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1274, Feb 12, 1965.
68. Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX–88, 120600Z Feb 65, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1277, Feb 13, 1965, COMUSMACV, 140453Z Feb 65. Ouane Rathikone ordered three companies of GM 14 airlifted to Vang Pao's assistance, but the order was not carried out because the troops were loyal to Khamkong Vongnarath.
69. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX–96, 151200Z Feb 65.

and attacks against fixed targets, but special strikes inspired by fast-breaking intelligence. In line with this thinking, Colonel Tyrrell and the FAR G–2 (Intelligence) came up with two such targets in the Samneua section for which instant fragging was asked. The first consisted of four 105-mm howitzers about twenty miles south of Samneua adjacent to Route 6; the second was two supply and bivouac areas near the town of Hua Xieng.[70]

The air attaché was also working on another high-priority target along Route 7. Meo roadwatch teams had just discovered about twenty tanks scattered along a road near the village of Ban Houa Xieng, roughly twenty miles southwest from Samneua just off Route 6. Several self-propelled 37-mm and 57-mm guns accompanied the vehicles, and four 105-mm artillery pieces and other assorted antiaircraft guns were found two miles south of the village. This "target complex," the largest yet seen in northern Laos, posed a critical threat to the Meo forces trying to thwart the communist takeover of Samneua Province. Due to friendly guerrilla action in the area, there was no assurance the convoy would remain stationary for long; and speed was of the essence.[71]

With no machinery to handle special, quick-reaction targets, Sullivan's request that such targets be struck presented a problem. All potential targets had been screened through an elaborate and time-consuming process that relied heavily on aerial photography for verification. Approved targets went on lists from which missions were eventually scheduled. For Tyrrell's three targets, Washington had no Yankee Team or U–2 photography nor were they on any RLG-approved list; and before the State Department would consider the strike, it wanted Souvanna's views.[72]

Actually, the prime minister had approved the target right after its discovery, and he wanted U.S. aircraft to attack it as soon as possible. As usual, his sole concern was publicity. If the strikes were carried off without a loss, he wanted nothing said about them. Sullivan was willing and pleaded with Washington to keep the lid on any "uncontrolled publicity" should the mission be authorized. Once Souvanna's thinking was known, State lost no time in approving the mission, while stressing that secrecy be maintained in deference to the Royal Laotian Government.[73]

On February 17, 1965, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered Admiral Sharp to conduct this special mission (Barrel Roll 30). The targets listed for the mission, however, omitted the truck convoy spotted by the Meo teams. The four 105-mm howitzers in fixed positions around Ban Houa Xieng would be hit instead, using not more than twelve strike aircraft and six flak suppressors carrying conventional ordnance. The type of planes would be left to General Moore, the sole restriction being they could not be launched from Thai bases. Prestrike weather and photo reconnaissance was authorized as well as support aircraft for MiG combat air patrol and search and rescue. No date was set for the mission and it did not have to follow in sequence after Barrel Roll 29. Even the forty-eight-hour sterile period between this and other missions was waived—but just for this strike.[74]

When the CINCPAC staff got the JCS order, they saw at once that it did not include the truck convoy. Admiral Sharp wired General Westmoreland to hold Barrel Roll 30 until he could obtain clarification. He felt that the convoy was too valuable a target to let slip by and that hitting just the howitzer batteries might flush the trucks and allow them to scatter. In less than ten minutes, Sharp received another message from the Joint Chiefs that added the convoy

70. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1283, Feb 15, 1965.
71. ( ) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 2089, 151530Z Feb 65, CINCPAC, 2095, 171220Z Feb 65.
72. ( ) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 696, Feb 15, 1965.
73. ( ) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1294, Feb 16, 1965, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 700, Feb 16, 1965.
74. ( ) Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 5385, 170213Z Feb 65.

but stipulated that it must be positively identified prior to attack. If this was impossible, no bombs were to be dropped. Later instructions from Sullivan prohibited firing into the nearby hills, since Meo teams were located there.[75]

(S) Barrel Roll 30 took place on February 19 (four days after the convoy was seen) by eight F–105s of the 12th Tactical Fighter Squadron out of Da Nang. The fighters were armed with rockets and AGM–12 Bullpup missiles. The eight F–100 flak suppressors carried cluster bomb units. The flight did not proceed directly to Ban Houa Xieng, but flew first to Samneua. The crews detected about thirty trucks on the town's outskirts and attacked, destroying three and leaving three others burning. Several small buildings in the town were reportedly demolished. Enemy ground fire downed one F–100.[76]

(S) After reading the operational report of Barrel Roll 30, Ambassador Sullivan had several questions—he had thought the primary target had been the 105-mm howitzers, with the truck convoy near Ban Houa Xieng next. Instead, the F–105s hit trucks and buildings in the southern outskirts of Samneua, roughly twenty miles from the requested targets. The artillery battery and truck convoy near Ban Houa Xieng was untouched. More important, the F–105s had attacked Samneua, which Sullivan claimed MACV knew was off limits. In fact, certain aspects of the mission appeared so "bizarre" to the ambassador that he wondered if there had not been a communication breakdown somewhere. He canceled all Barrel Roll missions until a satisfactory answer was secured that indicated all U.S. agencies were on "the same wavelength."[77]

(S) To reassure Ambassador Sullivan, Admiral Felt sent Maj. Gen. Theodore R. Milton to the February 22–23 SEACOORD meeting. (Milton, earlier the Thirteenth Air Force Commander, was then CINCPAC Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Operations.) The 2d Air Division explained it had not scheduled the howitzer target as first priority because several of Colonel Tyrrell's messages stressed there was no assurance the trucks would stay put and that any large convoy caught on Route 6 could be considered enemy. The 2d Air Division took this to mean that the trucks and self-propelled guns had first call. Since no one disapproved the scheduling nor questioned the target priorities, the interpretation had been that everything was satisfactory. Samneua was selected solely for area orientation, as a "fix" to pinpoint Route 6 for the three-minute southward flight to Ban Houa Xieng. When the strike force turned on heading, about thirty-five trucks caught the flight leader's eye. He ordered an attack since this could have been the earlier convoy rolling north, and hitting the trucks was within the intent of all embassy messages. Further, the 2d Air Division had no information that the town had been put off limits by Souvanna or Sullivan. Finally, and contrary to first reports, no building within Samneua's environs was struck: a truck hit by a Bullpup missile had exploded and set fire to a nearby shack.[78]

(S) After listening to General Milton[79] and reading the 2d Air Division's explanation, Sullivan admitted the pilots acted within the full intent of their instructions. He would lift the standdown. Still, one notable fact remained: Barrel Roll 30 had not hit any of the targets Sullivan had specifically discussed with Souvanna. The ambassador was not sure how he would justify this to the prime minister—but he would try. Perhaps more important, the episode raised second thoughts

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75. (S) Msgs, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, 172135Z Feb 65, 172245Z Feb 65, JCS to CINCPAC, 5446, 172258Z Feb 65, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1300, Feb 18, 1975.

76. (S) Msgs, 2d AD to JCS, 190928Z Feb 65, 191530Z Feb 65, JCS to Dir/NSA, 201431Z Feb 65.

77. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1328, Feb 20, 1965, COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1336, Feb 21, 1965.

78. (S) Msgs, PACAF to CINCPAC, 230100Z Feb 65, 230105Z Feb 65. The first message was 2d Air Division's explanation to PACAF, retransmitted to CINCPAC. The second message contained PACAF's support for 2d Air Division.

79. (S) Milton believed Sullivan was now convinced "we cannot read his mind and that he must tell us in advance rather than denounce us afterwards." [Msg, 13th AF to CINCPAC (exclusive for Adm Sharp from Milton), 231250Z Feb 65.]

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for Sullivan about quick reaction strikes. For some time, he had been arguing for them; but following Barrel Roll 30, he was not sure they could be flown with any degree of success. Even for briefed targets, more precise methods needed to be developed, perhaps with each U.S. agency involved assuming a fixed responsibility for some aspect of the mission.[80]

General Milton offered a suggestion at the SEACOORD meeting that satisfied the ambassador's criteria and had the potential to put everyone "on the same wavelength." Under his proposal, the embassy, based on local intelligence, had the responsibility of defining a target and proposing a strike and then, after clearing the strike with the RLG and listing any political or military limitations, sending the request to Washington for approval (or rejection) and the addition of any other restraints. Once approved by Washington, CINCPAC was to assign the mission to MACV, stipulating any restrictions imposed by the embassy, the RLG, or Washington. From this point on, regular fragging procedures were followed, including procedures for secondary targets. It was up to MACV to ensure that the unit that made the strike had sufficient information or to suspend the mission until the information was available. General Westmoreland and Admiral Sharp assented to this new procedure. The State Department and the JCS endorsed it on March 5.[81]

In addition, the Joint Chiefs recommended a step-by-step procedure for quick reaction targets. The embassy was to initiate all such requests, stating why expeditious or extraordinary action was needed, obtaining strike approval from the RLG, and defining any political or military limitations. After making sure the mission could be carried out, MACV recommended the strike force, ordnance, route, and other details. Admiral Sharp added his comments and, if Washington approved, the strike followed the usual Barrel Roll fragging procedures. Although this drawn-out method made a genuine quick reaction nigh impossible, Sullivan agreed to it on March 8, 1965.[82]

Earlier, at the same time as the Pathet Lao/Vietnamese Army began to increase pressure on the Meo in northeaster Laos, the Viet Cong stepped up terrorist activities in South Vietnam. President Johnson, after an attack at Pleiku on February 7 that killed seven and wounded 109 U.S. personnel, called the National Security Council into session. By coincidence, the President's Special Advisor on National Security Affairs, McGeorge Bundy (William P. Bundy's brother), was in Saigon conferring with Ambassaor Taylor and General Westmoreland. In a telephone conference with the President, they recommended an immediate retaliatory air strike against North Vietnam. The council approved four targets, and they were struck on the 7th and 8th. On February 8, Secretary McNamara asked the Joint Chiefs to plan for an eight-week program of military actions against North Vietnam as a reply to any "further provocations." On the 10th, even as this request was being staffed, the Viet Cong bombed an enlisted men's barracks near Qui Nhom, killing 30 and wounding 21 others.[83]

The next day, the Joint Chiefs completed the plan requested by McNamara. It called for eight weeks of air attacks on the north, broken into two to four USAF/VNAF strikes per week. The chiefs saw the reprisal rationale gradually diminishing and the bombing becoming a routine day-to-day operation and wanted to deploy 350 additional aircraft, including a fourth aircraft carrier, nine USAF tactical fighter squadrons, and thirty B–52s with supporting KC–135 tankers. The President approved the program, called Rolling Thunder, on the 13th.[84]

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80. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1347, Feb 23, 1965.
81. *Ibid*; msgs, COMUSMACV to AmEmb Vientiane, CINCPAC, 240938Z Feb 65, CINCPAC to JCS, 262352Z Feb 65, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 752, Mar 5, 1965.
82. Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 752, Mar 5, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1421, Mar 8, 1965.
83. *Gravel Pentagon Papers*, II, pp 270, 276, 302–303; Jacob Van Staavern, *USAF Plans and Operations in Southeast Asia, 1965* (Washington, 1966) pp 6–7.
84. *Gravel Pentagon Papers*, III, pp 319–321.

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On March 2, the United States began the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Even before the first F–105s had lifted off from Takhli and Korat, it was clear these air operations were to have a significant impact on those in Laos. Ambassador Sullivan had gotten an inkling of this at the February 22–23 SEACOORD meeting when General Westmoreland said he was going to ask Washington to consolidate Barrel Roll, Rolling Thunder, and Yankee Team into a single program. This meant, for example, that once the RF–101s arrived at Udorn, they would be scheduled for photo missions over North Vietnam. If the RTG approved, the Thai-based strike aircraft would also attack targets in the north. In pursuing these operations, both photo and strike aircraft would overfly Laos.[85]

Sullivan contested Westmoreland's consolidation plan for several reasons, the most important its potential harm to Souvanna's relations with the Soviet Union. Even with all the covert and overt U.S. military activity in Laos, the prime minister still enjoyed the backing of the Russians because, like the North Vietnamese, he never admitted anything. As long as Souvanna could keep up this public posture, he would have the continued support, however lukewarm, of the Soviet Union. However, if Barrel Roll and Yankee Team spilled over into North Vietnam, Souvanna could no longer claim Laotian air space was not being used for attacks against his neighbors. If this use were ever admitted, Sullivan was sure the Russians would denounce Souvanna and perhaps break off diplomatic relations. Worse, the North Vietnamese might invade Laos in full force and overrun the country.[86]

Sullivan added that Barrel Roll and Yankee Team were initially developed solely for Laos, and "the tricky nature of our operations requires them to stay (however artificially) in the same compartment." This is why he had gone along with the Air Force on moving part of Able Mable to Udorn. A small group of reconnaissance pilots operating exclusively over Laos were bound to acquire the special skills needed to enhance the quality of photo intelligence. Considering the rash of short rounds, Sullivan contended that this criteria applied equally to strike pilots. They, too, should be completely familiar with the terrain, their targets, and the rules of engagement. Moreover, it was clear to Sullivan that as Rolling Thunder unfolded, it would siphon more and more sorties from Barrel Roll. Consequently, he wondered if it was possible to assign a separate, Thai-based unit the specific task of working Barrel Roll. Put another way, Sullivan wanted some thought given to "dedicating" a squadron or wing to this area.[87]

As yet, the ambassador had no particular unit or service in mind but was partial to a specific plane—the Douglas A–1H Skyraider. From the moment Barrel Roll began, Sullivan had been impressed with this vintage aircraft's performance, particularly its ability (relative to jets) to absorb battle damage. The ambassador claimed he would not be so bold as to ask for, say, a dedicated Marine A–1 unit. Doing so would intrude into the very complex problem of controlling U.S. air power, something "well beyond our perspective as we peer out from under the jungle canopy of Laos." Nonetheless, he made it plain he found the prospect inviting.[88]

Sullivan afterwards voiced his views to General Harris who was reported to be "very much in agreement" but preferred jets over prop-driven A–1s. Sullivan deemed this satisfactory even though

> junior officers involved in the program show a distinct preference for the A–1H, which has longer time on target, more capability to absorb flak, less likelihood of smacking into a mountain at high speed, and more ability to stay with and protect choppers on SAR missions.[89]

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85. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1356, Feb 26, 1965.
86. *Ibid.*
87. *Ibid.*
88. *Ibid.*
89. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1393, Mar 3, 1965.

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When no positive response was forthcoming to his open hints, the ambassador tried another tack: A special Thai-based unit performing strikes, placing delay-fuzed bombs and antipersonnel weapons, and conducting reconnaissance in Barrel Roll was a good way to send a signal to Hanoi. A recent country team review of all Barrel Roll missions concluded it was hard to determine just what signal Hanoi was getting. Sullivan saw the signal as "scattered, if for no other reason than the program itself had been scattered," and a more systematic operation was needed to send a clearly defined signal. This did not mean a drastic overhauling but merely establishing and hitting interdiction points, chiefly at night, by a special group of planes whose pilots had become "experts" in Laos operations. Sullivan believed this plan would get a clearly audible signal to Hanoi. He did not rule out spectacular strikes now and then, but he felt that they "created more diversion than destruction" and that the "big show" cost the Air Force and Navy too many planes. He also remarked that Souvanna was partial to air operations since they were less likely to provoke communist propaganda.[90]

MACV opposed the assignment of any unit exclusively to Barrel Roll because it reduced flexibility. The "single manager for air" concept, which was to be the Air Force's main argument against other attempts by Sullivan and his successor to secure a wing dedicated to Barrel Roll, was not raised. Even so, General Westmoreland backed off from his plan to merge Barrel Roll, Yankee Team, and Rolling Thunder. For the time being, the areas stayed separate and the question of dedicated forces was shelved.[91]

In March 1965, the embassy and MACV put the finishing touches on a small-scale chokepoint program designed to slow the North Vietnamese truck flow into Laos and to increase the burden on enemy supply lines. The chokepoints were locations along primary routes where, due to topography, the roads were easy to cut but very difficult to bypass. Admiral Sharp concurred in the importance of chokepoints, but he repeated that it was more important to focus on the logistic bases supporting infiltration. He thought that destroying stored material and equipment before the monsoon came would make it very difficult for the enemy to keep troops in the field once the rains came. Besides, while the embassy and MACV had identified a few chokepoints and the initial bombing was no problem, keeping the roads blocked was the key to effectively slowing down trucks and porters. Moreover, the forty-eight-hour rule gave the enemy time to clear away the antipersonnel mines and fill up the crater holes, with little chance of these missions living up to expectations. In sum, Admiral Sharp felt that chokepoints were not good substitutes for strikes on supply dumps or other fixed targets.[92]

Sullivan stressed he did not specifically object to hitting supply dumps, but he did object to "jumping around" from one type of target to another. Allowing special missions, no matter how worthy, to draw off sorties lengthened the time required for a systematic chokepoint/seeding program to pay dividends. By turning down special strikes, Sullivan sought to get the Barrel Roll chokepoint effort going full steam and send a "steady signal to Hanoi."[93]

Under this program, once the roads had been cut, the chokepoints were to be periodically reseeded with delay-fuzed bombs and antipersonnel weapons to harass repair crews and add to the cratering, with the stalled traffic exploited by armed reconnaissance. However, with the gradual shifting emphasis to Rolling Thunder and the recent flurry of requests for "special missions," the Air Force and Navy might be hard pressed to sustain this new program. To prevent its dilution, Ambassador Sullivan rejected specials against the Ban Ken bridge and Nape

90. *Ibid.*
91. Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 06010? Mar 65 [date-time group incomplete].
92. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, Feb 2, 1965, COMUSMACV, 030638Z Mar 65, SECSTATE, 1394, Mar 6, 1965; msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 050253Z Mar 65.
93. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1416, Mar 6, 1965.

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staging areas. Such fixed targets could be banked, he asserted, to be hit later when the regular armed reconnaissance effort had tapered off.[94]

(S) In accord with Sullivan's thinking, CINCPAC's staff studied route interdiction possibilities near Samneua, using current topographic maps, latest Yankee Team photography, and roadwatch team reports. They concluded that all motor traffic in northeastern Laos was funneled through Samneua on Routes 6 and 65, and they identified several chokepoints. One included cliffs on the side of a hairpin curve on Route 6 about five miles southwest of Samneua. At another point, the road had several sharp turns with overhanging cliffs, narrow wooden bridges, and no place to bypass. CINCPAC intended to discuss these chokepoints with Ambassador Sullivan during a mid-March conference of mission chiefs at Baguio, Philippines. If approved, the plan was to use 750-pound bombs with delay fuzes that detonated at varying intervals, triggering earth slides and pestering repair crews for days afterwards, and to follow this with regular seeding with antipersonnel mines to deter portering around them.[95]

(S) The chokepoints selected by the CINCPAC staff were free of friendly forces. They were confirmed as legitimate targets by [redacted] personnel familiar with Samneua. Striking all the chokepoints at the same time would have required more than a hundred planes—a Barrel Roll mission much larger than any previous one. It was too close to the "spectacular show" Souvanna frowned upon. As Sullivan was en route to Baguio, Emory C. Swank, Sullivan's deputy, recommended that the missions be spaced over a few days, even at the cost of the element of surprise.[96] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA & STATE

(S) At Baguio, Admiral Sharp briefed Sullivan on the Samneua chokepoints. The ambassador validated them on the condition that the missions were flown on consecutive days instead of all at once. This required that Washington shrink the sterile period from forty-eight to twenty-four hours. The Joint Chiefs requested National Security Council approval for the strikes (Barrel Roll 42 through 55) with seven day and seven night missions over two weeks and no limitation on the number of strike aircraft per mission. The chiefs also proposed that the forty-eight-hour sterile period be permanently lowered to twenty-four hours. However, it appeared to the State Department that, if all these missions were sanctioned, they would not meet Souvanna's "nonspectacular" criteria. The plans were believed to be good examples of the trend toward enlarging the scale and frequency of Barrel Roll. Sullivan's approval of CINCPAC's chokepoints had raised the eyebrows of officials at State, who wondered if trimming the size of Barrel Roll was still the ambassador's position.[97]

(S) Since his talk with Admiral Sharp, Sullivan had undergone a change of heart. He no longer saw any harm in a single armed reconnaissance flight per day[98] (or seven a week, mixed day and night), and reseeding missions as required. He thought that this was within Souvanna's guidelines, and Sullivan did not want to appear rigid regarding the number of aircraft per mission. He felt that the field commander was the best judge of what was needed to hit the target while assuring crew safety. On the other hand, Sullivan continued to like chokepoints better than supply stores or concentrations; it just seemed logical to block lines of communication before demolishing depots. Moreover, attacking logistic targets was possible during the rainy season when the communists, lacking air transport, had a hard time resupplying their troops.[99]

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94. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, Feb 2, 1965, COMUSMACV, 030638Z Mar 65, SECSTATE, 1394, Mar 6, 1965.
95. (S) Msg, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 062145Z Mar 65.
96. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 101157Z Mar 65.
97. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 780, Mar 14, 1965.
98. (S) The 2d Air Division's armed reconnaissance frag orders usually called for four strike aircraft per day and two to four per night. In case of chokepoints, sixteen bombers and twelve flak suppressors were normally employed. Reseeding missions used twelve bombers and twelve suppressors.
99. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1470, Mar 16, 1965.

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The War in Northern Laos

On March 18, Sullivan went along with General Westmoreland's request that the rest of the missions (Barrel Roll 32–40) be flown on the basis of one mission every twenty-four hours. Noting that the number of flying days was decreasing, the ambassador urged that every advantage be taken of the good weather while it lasted. Because of Sullivan's new position, Washington at once pared the sterile period to twenty-four hours and, on March 23, applied it to reseeding operations as well.[100]

On April 3, Ambassador Sullivan's hand was strengthened as Barrel Roll was split into two programs. The first, Barrel Roll, was oriented toward northern Laos; the other, Steel Tiger, focused on interdiction of the infiltration routes in southern Laos that supplied the Viet Cong.[101] Under this setup, Sullivan spelled out RLG needs and the Barrel Roll program supported them. He was also given more leeway in handling approved programs. For example, he could speed up or slow down attacks on chokepoints near Samneua and Route 7 without clearing the changes with Washington. Strong indications suggested that the ambassador would be given greater freedom in planning and carrying out future operations. Steel Tiger was not expected to cut into Barrel Roll sorties even though panhandle strikes would ultimately intensify. Nevertheless, the Joint Chiefs accented that the new interdiction effort would have first call on American air power in Laos.[102]

While welcoming the Barrel Roll realignment, Ambassador Sullivan cautioned Washington that RLG approval was needed for new programs and for the United States to attack targets. Washington was reminded that, above all, Laos was not North Vietnam and was to be treated the same as Viet Cong-held territory in South Vietnam. Laos was a friendly country; and Laotian national interests and conditions, as interpreted by Souvanna, took precedence. On occasion, the United States might have to sacrifice military opportunities or temper them to the political climate. Air power in Laos would in every instance have to operate within this framework. It was a point that would bear repeating.[103]

Sullivan thought he had the ideal way to make Barrel Roll "solely responsive" to RLG needs. Again, it lay in designating a special unit of aircraft and pilots "to carry out the bread-and-butter portion of Barrel Roll, supplemented as needed . . . by PACFLT and Second Air Division assets for bigger operations."[104]

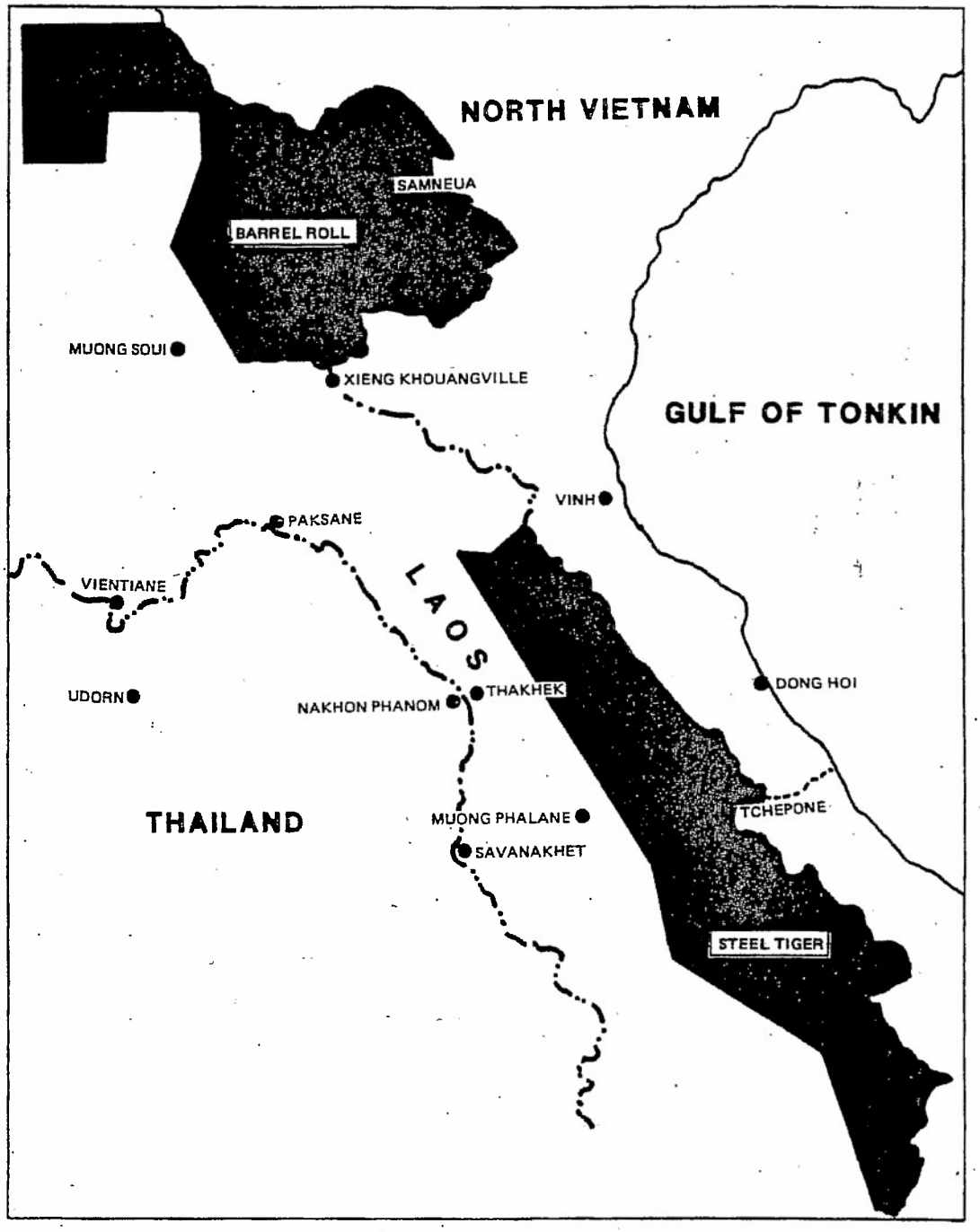
Sullivan described RLG requirements in the new Barrel Roll as twofold: a systematic interdiction of Routes 6, 65, and 7 and a rapid response to calls for help in case of a major Pathet Lao/NVA push in northern Laos. He acknowledged that political factors (such as the Geneva accords) posed problems and limited the American ability to assist.[105]

Guidelines for Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger had been established at the SEACOORD meeting on March 27. The demarcation zone or belt between Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger extended from the confluence of the Ca Dinh and Muone Rivers to a point just north of the Route 8/Nape Pass intersection. Search and rescue in Steel Tiger had been assigned to the 2d Air Division, which used HH–43 helicopters from Nakhon Phanom. (To increase the flying range, Sullivan suggested that fuel be pre-positioned at friendly held points in the panhandle. An HU–16 aircraft was transferred to Udorn for SAR control, but Air America retained the rescue responsibility for Barrel Roll. The CIA agreed to prohibit its roadwatch teams from within two hundred yards of a motorable road so that targets detected closer than this could be considered hostile.[106]

100. Msgs, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, AmEmb Vientiane, 161121Z Mar 65; AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1487, Mar 18, 1965, JCS to CINCPAC, 7481, 192332Z Mar 65, 7592, 231549Z Mar 65.
101. *Gravel Pentagon Papers*, III, 337–38; msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 7484, 231953Z Mar 65.
102. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 809, Mar 20, 1965, JCS to CINCPAC, 7624, 231953Z Mar 65.
103. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1511, Mar 22, 1965.
104. *Ibid.*
105. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1544, Mar 27, 1965.
106. *Ibid*; msg, CINCPACAF to CSAF, 300237Z Mar 65.

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Barrel Roll/Steel Tiger Areas
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Sullivan did not fare as well in seeking dedicated forces. Admiral Sharp insisted it was unnecessary to station a special unit at Udorn or anywhere else specifically for Barrel Roll. There were plenty of strike aircraft on hand in the theater to carry out Barrel Roll missions and those in Steel Tiger, Rolling Thunder, and Yankee Team. CINCPAC saw no benefit in earmarking specific units for a single program because it reduced flexibility. He thought Barrel Roll should be responsive to RLG needs as outlined by Sullivan, but "how these requirements are fulfilled . . . is a military problem which is my responsibility."[107]

Sullivan understood this rationale, but he reminded Sharp that at Baguio it was a CINCPAC suggestion to put a fairly senior commander at Udorn. If Generals Westmoreland and Moore were persuaded to delegate Barrel Roll decisions to the deputy commander, Sullivan thought it would go a long way toward solving the problem. As a alternative that might be more palatable, he proposed designating Thai-based aircraft as those responsible for Barrel Roll and placing them under the deputy commander's control.[108]

The ambassador's sudden shift behind General Maddux's prior suggestion to give the deputy commander more responsibility should not have been surprising. Before, Sullivan had been cool to the idea because he did not want to irritate General Westmoreland, but the recent division of Barrel Roll cast the matter in a different light. With MACV and Washington concentrating on corridor infiltration, the country team was able to devote its energies to northern Laos. To discharge his mandate, Sullivan wanted (and needed) more flexible air operations, and he saw the ideal setup as an approved bank of targets with the military commander closest to the intelligence sources able to direct sorties as needed. The deputy commander's location at Udorn made him ideally suited for this task. For example, if an early morning weather reconnaissance aircraft noticed that a chokepoint needed reseeding, he could divert a sortie from a fragged target. If friendly troops or contract pilots spotted an enemy truck convoy, the target could be cleared with the embassy and a quick reaction strike ordered. Even so, the military representatives told Sullivan what he wanted was impossible. Missions were scheduled too far in advance and, because of "politics," were equally divided between the Navy and Air Force. Loading and unloading various weapons, complex pilot briefings, and overly restrictive rules of engagement ruled out quick reaction strikes. Finally, with Sharp's "reminder from the quarterdeck" that military matters were his responsibility, the SEACOORD conferees were loathe to engage in operational planning "with a striped-pants type."[109]

After mulling over Sullivan's objectives and suggestions, Admiral Sharp concluded that most of them could be met if the ground rules and rules of engagement were changed. Washington had to authorize the armed reconnaissance target bank and remove restrictions on the number of aircraft or missions a day. The "operational commander" needed authority to commit alert aircraft without clearing the launch through Washington. Ambassador Martin had to procure Thai agreement to launch U.S. planes from bases in Thailand for both banked and quick reaction targets. This meant the OP–01 report[110] could no longer be filed twenty-four hours in advance. However, by using Thai bases for all Barrel Roll missions, Sharp thought the RTG might accept a generalized briefing on the mission before the details were firmed up. If not, the aircraft had to be from carriers or from U.S. resources based in South Vietnam. Sharp did not mention to the Joint Chiefs Sullivan's suggestion to give the deputy commander at Udorn more authority. Ambassador Martin said he believed the Thai Supreme Command

107. ( ) Msg, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 261930Z Mar 65.
108. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC (Personal Amb Sullivan to Adm Sharp), 260716Z Mar 65.
109. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1544, Mar 27, 1965.
110. ( ) Sent by the 2d Air Division to the embassy at Bangkok, the OP–01 report contained the mission number, number of aircraft by type and mission, launch base, and estimated time of departure. Martin used this information to brief the RTG.

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would buy the generalized briefing, but he made no commitment to approach them on the matter.[111]

Sullivan briefed Souvanna on the new Steel Tiger program on March 30. The prime minister asked a few questions and gave his permission. As in the past, the embassy was to keep in close touch with Thao Ma and take every precaution to avoid short rounds. Souvanna commented that, at this time of year, the forest canopy in the south was thick and heavy and the weather was poor. He requested periodic reports of the results.[112]

Considering the merits of the deputy commander's headquarters at Udorn, it was odd Admiral Sharp did not address this point to the JCS; but he was looking further down the road than the Udorn headquarters. From messages crossing his desk, Sharp knew the day was close at hand when Thailand would house several USAF wings and serve as a launch base for a sustained air campaign against North Vietnam. This called for an organization much bigger than the deputy commander's. He wanted to remove MACTHAI from MACV, put an Air Force lieutenant general in command, and make him responsible for all U.S. activity in Thailand. This officer would control the Thailand Military Assistance Program (where the emphasis was already shifting from the RTA to the RTAF), Barrel Roll, and (in time) Rolling Thunder. Since Steel Tiger was designed to choke off the enemy logistic flow into South Vietnam, it would remain the responsibility of Westmoreland and Moore.[113]

In June 1964, General Westmoreland had agreed to a three-star COMUSMACTHAI separate from COMUSMACV, but much had happened since then. He favored instead centralized control of the entire American military effort in Southeast Asia. He noted that the three ambassadors had thought along these lines when they created SEACOORD. This informal committee often met in Saigon, where MACV and its Air Force component command, the 2d Air Division, were located. Under U.S. contingency plans, COMUSMACV was the Commander, United States Forces, Southeast Asia, and the 2d Air Division commander was in charge of all air. Since Southeast Asia was already a theater, the ideal was air operations handled by a single headquarters with a single commander. This was consistent with USAF doctrine on the employment of air power. Simply stated, Westmoreland wanted one man in charge of all air activity in Southeast Asia, and a separate COMUSMACTHAI with distinct air responsibilities did not achieve this. Further, Westmoreland did not think the Thai were as sensitive as before to an officer stationed in South Vietnam wearing the COMUSMACTHAI hat.[114]

Ambassador Martin had stayed out of the MACTHAI-MACV hassle because he saw it as an interservice quarrel; but following the meeting, he was not so sure. The Thai MAP was tilting toward the RTAF, and with several USAF units at RTAF bases (and more to come), the thrust in Thailand was clearly on air power. Above all, Martin strongly dissented from Westmoreland's assessment of the Thai—they were still upset over President Kennedy's unilateral founding of MACTHAI. Every time a senior U.S. military commander visited Bangkok, Hanoi and Peking trumpeted that the Americans were telling their Thai puppets what to do next. The Royal Thailand Government had grown so thin skinned to this propaganda charge that high-ranking officials privately told Martin they hoped the sticky situation in South Vietnam would pin Westmoreland down and compel him to cancel his periodic visits to General Easterbrook, DEPCOMUSMACTHAI.[115] Deferring to Thai sensitivity, Martin supported severing

111. ( ) Msgs, CINCPAC to JCS, 300238Z Mar 65, AmEmb Bangkok to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1462, Apr 1, 1965.
112. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1571, Mar 30, 1965.
113. ( ) Msgs, CINCPAC to CHJUSMAGTHAI (Personal Adm Sharp to Maj Gen Easterbrook), 020013Z Feb 65, COMUSMACV, 270325Z Mar 65.
114. ( ) Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 301040Z Mar 65.
115. ( ) Martin stressed that the Thai respected General Westmoreland and had complete confidence in his military ability. They just did not like COMUSMACTHAI being in Saigon.

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MACTHAI from MACV and designating an Air Force lieutenant general as COMUSMACTHAI. The ambassador already knew the RTG would accede to this action. The entire question was brought up at the April Secretary of Defense Conference in Honolulu, but McNamara put off a decision for almost two months. On May 27, he approved the separation of MACTHAI from MACV and appointed General Easterbrook as COMUSMACTHAI in lieu of a USAF officer, but an Air Force brigadier general would serve as MACTHAI Chief of Staff. However, it was more important to the Air Force that MACTHAI—unlike MACV—would control none of the air units in Thailand.[116]

The upswing in strike operations in Laos and North Vietnam heightened the burden on search and rescue, causing authorities to take a closer look at the program. In February 1965, Air America had asked for an additional four H–34 helicopters, increasing its fleet to sixteen. The helicopters would not be used solely for rescue but in all phases of Air America operations. H–34s were short worldwide, and Admiral Sharp spent the better part of a month seeking a few. He eventually requested that the U.S. Navy supply them from a source outside the Pacific Command.[117]

Gen. John P. McConnell, the new Air Force chief of staff, objected to giving these helicopters to Air America for search and rescue. With more American air power deployed to Southeast Asia, it was time to bring in additional USAF rescue helicopters and personnel. Ambassador Sullivan rejected McConnell's views, stressing to Admiral Sharp that Air America's success in search and rescue stemmed from pilots knowing the Laotian hinterlands "like the back of their hand." Sullivan emphasized that Air Force crews would enter these operations "dangerously cold" and, by implication, not do as well. Further, Air Force crews were prohibited from operating regularly in Laos, because of the Geneva accords. Sharp sided with Sullivan, seeing no reason to change because of Air America's outstanding rescue performance.[118]

In the spring of 1965, the Air Force had two HU–16s and seven HH–43s in Thailand available for search and rescue. The airmen normally worked the panhandle, the contract pilots northern Laos; but this was not a hard and fast rule. Several times, Air America C–123 control/cargo ships and T–28s manned by the airline's pilots flew SAR missions in central and southern Laos; but since the C–123s lacked beacon homing equipment, they were generally less satisfactory. On April 3—the kickoff date for Steel Tiger—an Air America control ship conducting a panhandle search and rescue directed suppressive fire on what were thought to be enemy troops. The troops turned out to be friendly forces; four were killed, with five more wounded. Following this incident, Thao Ma decided that one of his officers must be on board the control ship during any Steel Tiger search and rescue and that the crews had to be briefed at Savannakhet before flying the mission. Since the control ships operating over the corridor were chiefly Air Force, Sullivan figured the only way he could comply was to place the HU–16 and its crew under Air America cover.[119]

Interwoven with the control ship problem was the difficulty with SAR missions flown in the northwestern part of North Vietnam near the Laotian border. Rescue aircraft going into this area were stationed in South Vietnam or with the Seventh Fleet in Tonkin Gulf. Forces based in Laos or Thailand would be closer and better, but Sullivan worried that the political risks might be more than Souvanna could accept. On the other hand, the ambassador did not want Air America flying into North Vietnam, even though the airline had pulled off a successful

116. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1456, Mar 31, 1965, JCS to CINCPAC, 2998, 272224Z May 65; hist, COMUSMACV, 1965, Annex A, p 102.
117. Msgs, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 100920Z Feb 65, CINCPAC to JCS, 121120Z Mar 65.
118. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 060002Z Mar 65, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 231155Z Feb 65, AmEmb Baguio (Amb Sullivan) to AmEmb Vientiane, 1, Mar 9, 1965, CINCPAC to JCS, 132125Z Mar 65.
119. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1620, Apr 7, 1965.

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SAR just over the border on April 5. One way out of this dilemma was an earlier SEACOORD suggestion that USAF HH–43s stage to remote lima sites close to the North Vietnamese border. These sites were for the most part controlled [redacted] and there seemed slight chance of enemy detection. Sullivan proposed USAF-marked T–28s for helicopter escort, manned by Water Pump pilots flying out of either Nakhon Phanom or Udorn. He further proposed that rescue combat air patrol as well as control ship support come from the Air Force or Navy.[120]

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General Moore disliked all of these new ground rules and proposals. First, 2d Air Division regulations barred any search and rescue control ship from directing air strikes, and the unfortunate incident with the Air America C–123 could not be repeated with an HU–16. Consequently, there was no need to land at Savannakhet to pick up an RLAF officer and, above all, no need to sheep-dip USAF aircrews. If Thao Ma was adamant about having his personnel on the scene, Moore suggested that an Air America C–123 be sent to Savannakhet for pickup whenever a SAR was in progress and that the HU–16 continue to handle the rescue until this aircraft arrived. Moore further opposed having Water Pump pilots fly cover—jets based in Thailand or South Vietnam, with their responsiveness and firepower, were better for this mission. Last, he was only lukewarm to pre-positioning the HH–43s at remote sites because of logistic requirements and the helicopter's slow speed. Westmoreland backed him up.[121]

Ambassador Sullivan offered a rather complicated and time-consuming compromise. One of the two USAF HU–16s, with USAF marking and crew, was to work jointly with Air America in northern Laos, but it was to be the sole aircraft to respond if an American plane was downed within North Vietnam. During a panhandle SAR, this same Albatross could answer the first mayday but not carry out the SAR; this was the job of the second HU–16. This latter aircraft was to be based at Nakhon Phanom, stage through Savannakhet, and be flown by a sanitized USAF crew. As soon as this crew was briefed and the RLAF officer got on board, their role was that of scene commander, assuming this from the first HU–16. The ambassador implied he did not know what all the fuss was about—he believed the biggest problem was merely "an optical one of shifting some available USAF assets from Udorn to stage through Savannakhet." It did not entail any change in basic SAR control procedures.[122]

Then General Harris, in turn, disagreed. The PACAF commander pointed out that the HU–16s were pre-positioned in orbit over the Laos-Thailand border each time the Air Force and Navy flew in Laos or North Vietnam. The crews were in continuous radio communication with rescue personnel in the deputy commander's ASOC, as well as with strike aircraft. Experience had shown that if a SAR was to have a chance of success, the HU–16 must be allowed to fly unrestricted to the distress scene, whether it be in Laos or across the border in North Vietnam. Sheep-dipping robbed the crews of the Geneva Convention's protection and confined them to Laos. Instead, to avoid Sullivan's complicated procedures, Harris suggested that Thao Ma be pressured to rescind his prohibitions. CINCPACAF was willing to turn over the search and rescue to the Air America C–123 (called the Victor control ship) as soon as it arrived on scene. He also preferred U.S. aircraft, with U.S. markings, flying cover for SAR helicopters, but he did not specify jet or prop-driven aircraft. After reviewing all the telegrams, Admiral Sharp sided completely with General Harris.[123]

While Sullivan fenced with the military over SAR methods, Thao Ma and the FAR general staff anxiously watched the start of a Pathet Lao buildup opposite Muong Phalane. On April 13, the RLAF chief requested that U.S. jets strike two enemy troop concentrations about

120. *Ibid.*
121. Msgs, 2d AD to PACAF, 111000Z Apr 65, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 130800Z Apr 65.
122. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1666, Apr 13, 1965.
123. Msgs, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 140150Z Apr 65, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 172210Z Apr 65.

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fifteen miles north of the town. He suggested that T–28s lead in the bombers, mark the target with smoke rockets, and then act as forward air controllers. Further, he wanted to place an RLAF officer on board the Victor control ship, using the plane to relay messages between the T–28s and strike aircraft. As a further precaution against short rounds, government troops were to indicate their positions with white panels. Both Sullivan and Souvanna ratified the request—the first use of U.S. aircraft in close support of Laotian ground forces. Ambassador Martin also received RTG permission to employ Thai-based USAF aircraft on the mission.[124]

The communist troops were hit the next day by sixteen F–105s from Korat carrying CBU–2A and 750-pound bombs fuzed "instant." Following Thao Ma's plan, the mission used the RLAF T–28s and the Victor C–123 and was completed without a hitch. Damage was unknown, however, due to dense vegetation surrounding the target. The first flight sighted no enemy troops; the second, after dropping its bombs, spotted five or six running soldiers. The 2d Air Division believed the mission was wasted.[125]

Considering only visible bomb damage, the 2d Air Division's assessment was correct; but the new procedures linking RLAF T–28s and Air America control ships seemed sound. General Moore advocated an alert force of four aircraft to be allocated (not dedicated) to the deputy commander's ASOC. Delighted with Moore's offer, Ambassador Sullivan accepted it instantly, and Martin quickly got RTG approval. These Thai-based jets (soon called Bango/Whiplash)[126] were able to respond at once to emergency air requests from the embassy at Vientiane, as well as to requests from other sources. When the mission was close support of ground troops, the embassy either provided forward air controllers or concurred in the means chosen to control the strike.[127]

Also impressed with the April 14 mission's coordination, Thao Ma modified his demand for an RLAF officer to be on board any control ship handling a panhandle search and rescue. Rescues in the area's eastern section (where most of the trails were) were allowed to proceed as before, removing the need to sheep-dip USAF aircraft and crews; but an RLAF officer aboard the control ship was still required in central Laos (where the FAR were engaged against the Pathet Lao). This increased the workload on Air America, impelling Sullivan to ask that the airline be given three more C–123s with UHF homing capability to serve as SAR and strike control ships, as well as hauling cargo. CINCPAC endorsed this request and the previous one for four additional H–34 helicopters. Finally, to replace the "marginally effective" HH–43s, the Air Force ordered six HH–3 Jolly Green Giant helicopters modified for combat, three for Da Nang and three for Nakhon Phanom. However, these aircraft were not scheduled to arrive until October 1; and until then, search and rescue in the northwest fringes of North Vietnam had to remain an Air America mission.[128]

Sullivan reluctantly went along; but near the end of June, he realized a new remedy was needed. On June 20 and 21, two Air America H–34 helicopters had been badly shot up rescuing an F–4 pilot inside North Vietnam, about forty miles east of Samneua. Even though both aircraft managed to limp back to Nakhon Phanom, Sullivan once more sounded the alarm over the airline conducting rescues across the border. Losing either helicopter would have been "terribly embarrassing" for the U.S. and Laotian governments. Sullivan [redacted] most hesitant to see this situation go on. They knew the Air Force was bringing in the HH–3,

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124. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1688, Apr 14, 1965.
125. Msg, 2d AD to JCS, 140932Z Apr 65.
126. Bango was the call sign for F–4s; Whiplash the call sign for F–105s.
127. Msgs, 2d AD to AmEmb Vientiane, 190801Z Apr 65, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1770, Apr 22, 1965.
128. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1821, May 7, 1965, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 240120Z Apr 65.

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but the scheduled October date might be too late. The ambassador wondered why no one had acted on his prior suggestion to place fuel at isolated lima sites and stage the HH–43s from them. The selected lima sites (36, 46, and 107) were held by FAR and Meo ADC (militia) battalions and were considered secure for this type of operation. Friendly troops also occupied sufficient countryside to screen observation, not only from the communists, but also from "the prying eyes of ICC, French, press, etc." Sullivan thought the helicopters could fly to these sites, refuel, have enough range to fly the search and rescue, and return to the forward operating location for another refueling before going back to Thailand. If Admiral Sharp accepted the plan, Sullivan was sure he could "nudge the [Washington] machinery into motion."[129]

Sharp shared Sullivan's concern over the ever increasing risk in Air America rescue operations. "This is properly the job for the military," he observed, "and we are going to take it on just as quickly as we can get in shape to do it." CINCPAC next contacted Generals Harris and Moore. Harris cabled General McConnell in Washington that this was what chance the Air Force had been looking for—a chance to move into the search and rescue picture, replacing Air America. McConnell approached the other chiefs and they authorized two unmodified (unarmored, no SSB radio) CH–3Cs to be sent by Tactical Air Command to Nakhon Phanom for ninety days temporary duty. Fuel was flown to the lima sites, and the first HH–43 staging flights took place on June 26. Two days later, the Royal Thailand Government authorized the deployment to Nakhon Phanom of the two CH–3Cs and between twenty and forty personnel.[130]

The question of special air warfare pilots flying T–28s during search and rescue was likewise settled. When this was first proposed, the Bangkok embassy did not think it a wise move, since the RTG approved the SAW deployment solely as a training mission.[131] The United States did have permission to use Thai-based forces in SAR over Laos; but to the embassy, using Water Pump's T–28s "with freshly painted USAF insignia" was the equivalent of stationing five bona fide Air Force fighters at Udorn. However, using Nakhon Phanom or Udorn as a staging base would require a new RTG clearance. The embassy hinted the Thai would thumb down the idea.[132]

Sullivan went along with this rationale for two months; but by mid-May, he was troubled over how often he had given Air America T–28 pilots permission to fly low cover for SAR helicopters. He had been obliged to do this because the Navy could not furnish any A–1Hs for alert at Udorn and because those from carriers always seemed to arrive over Laos too late. Sullivan knew that every flight by a contract pilot in a T–28 jeopardized the Air America mission. There was a close call the previous week when a T–28 was shot up on a SAR mission over North Vietnam but managed to crashland in friendly territory. Accordingly, Sullivan urged again that the Udorn SAW pilots be allowed to put USAF markings on their T–28s and fly this low coverage when needed.[133] This time, General Harris went along and the Bangkok embassy agreed to ask the Royal Thailand Government [redacted] On June 4, 1965, the Thai Supreme Command gave approval.[134]

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129. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 2065, Jun 22, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2085, Jun 26, 1965.

130. Msgs, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 230353Z Jun 65, AmEmb Vientiane to 2d AD (Personal Maj Gen Moore to Amb Sullivan), 251057Z Jun 65, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 230131Z Jun 54, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 2133, Jun 28, 1965.

131. However, one of Water Pump's original missions was to provide a readily available source of U.S. aircraft to augment the RLAF, if needed. [Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 052053Z Mar 64, CINCPAC to JCS, 130443Z Mar 64.]

132. Msg, AmEmb Bangkok to 2d AD, SECSTATE, 1313, Mar 10, 1965.

133. Eventually, three-sided brackets were mounted along the rear half of the T–28 fuselage. Panels with either RLAF or USAF insignia were slipped into the brackets depending on the mission. Training flights carried no national markings whatsoever. [Personal recollections of the author.]

134. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to AmEmb Bangkok, SECSTATE, 1884, May 18, 1965, AmEmb Bangkok to

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The War in Northern Laos

The creation of Steel Tiger fostered further relaxation of Washington's hand on air operations. Beginning on April 14, the Joint Chiefs let CINCPAC approve all Yankee Team missions over Laos except in the extreme north (where the Chinese were poking along on their road) and in the remote western reaches (where Pathet Lao activity had dwindled since Phoumi's forces fled Nam Tha). Except in an emergency, no aircraft was to enter or leave Laos via North Vietnam nor could route reconnaissance be flown under ten thousand feet. If this altitude proved unsatisfactory, a single low-level, high-speed pass could be made. Although escorts were authorized, suppressive fire on the towns of Samneua, Khangkhai, and Xieng Khouangville was forbidden—even if an escort was fired upon. Missions not falling in these categories needed clearance through the Joint Chiefs for a case-by-case review, and all missions still had to be coordinated with the embassy in Vientiane. This particularly applied to retaliation strikes—which required Sullivan's specific approval.[135]

On April 17, Washington's grip on strike operations in Laos was eased more. CINCPAC and the embassy were allowed to set up Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger missions together, without worrying about their number, the division between day and night sorties, sterile periods, or how many planes per mission. Secondary targets were selected from the embassy/RLAF lists. If there were no night secondary targets, aircrews were allowed to drop ordnance on Tiger Island, North Vietnam, or in free-strike zones in South Vietnam. Chokepoints were to be reseeded as often as needed. Cratering was authorized as an appropriate secondary target. All conventional ordnance was allowed, but napalm was banned. In coordination with or at the request of the embassy, any fixed or mobile target of opportunity could be hit without checking through Washington, but the instructions did not mention the use of U.S. aircraft for close support of Laotian ground forces.[136]

On May 3, Sullivan agreed to a MACV proposal to reverse the priorities between armed reconnaissance and secondary targets. That is, aircraft could hit a fixed target first, then fly armed reconnaissance of roads and lines of communication. The ambassador took this action because Colonel Tyrrell convinced him that aircraft, if they still had sufficient rockets or 20-mm ammunition to perform effective route interdiction, could maneuver better once they had dropped their bombs. Even so, the ambassador suspected that there was a good chance MACV might let the secondaries detract from the armed reconnaissance program. So, "at the risk of being accused of being an armchair Air Marshal," Sullivan reminded Westmoreland that now was the time to focus on trucks. "Later, when roads are impassable, we can concentrate on depots in fair assurance the Viet Minh will not . . . be able to resupply them." However, Sullivan exaggerated when he said there was still two months of good flying weather left "to plaster the depots."[137]

At the same time, the first Bango/Whiplash fighters went on alert. Beginning on May 5, Tyrrell received several reports that a group of ten to twelve enemy tanks were maneuvering on the Plain of Jars. On one occasion, T–28s took off but could not find the tanks because of weather. On May 9, the armor was seen near Muong Kheung, and eleven T–28s were instantly fragged, followed by a flight of Bango F–4Cs. After dispensing their ordnance, the [redacted] T–28 pilots marked the target and flew as forward air controllers for the jets. All told, four tanks were destroyed and seven damaged. Tyrrell judged the response and results excellent, with the F–4s arriving one hour and fifteen minutes after they were requested.[138]

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AmEmb Vientiane, SECSTATE, 1821, May 19, 1965, 1956, Jun 4, 1965.

135. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1664, Apr 13, 1965, JCS to CINCPAC, 9048, 141830Z Apr 65.

136. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 171853Z Apr 65.

137. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1787, May 3, 1965, COMUSMACV (Exclusive for Gen Westmoreland), 031057Z May 65.

138. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2460, 100105Z May 65.

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(S) The alert aircraft worked almost daily over the next two weeks. On May 22, three F–4s from Ubon flew close support for FAR troops trying to hold Muong Nga in northern Luang Prabang Province. During the melee that afternoon, a liaison plane was shot down. The next day, four F–105s from Takhli rendezvoused with Victor control as part of the search and rescue effort to locate the pilot. The jets flew high combat air patrol and were to drop ordnance only to protect the SAR H–34s and T–28 low combat air patrol. However, the Victor forward air controller called in the F–105s to destroy a cluster of shacks and "to strike fear into the enemy." The Thunderchiefs unloosed 20-mm cannon fire and fifteen 2.75-inch rockets at what turned out to be friendly villagers and FAR soldiers huddled within. The final toll was thirteen dead and nineteen wounded. Since the jets were under positive control, Sullivan took full blame for the incident; but needless to say, the Air America C–123 pilot was on his way back to the United States within forty-eight hours. It was ironic that, after his considerable doubt over the HU–16 control ships and their procedures, Sullivan suffered his most serious short round at the hands of personnel he believed better suited for SAR work in northern Laos than the Air Force.[139]

(S) In mid-July, the alert jet force was enlarged. At least two, but no more than four, F–105s and F–4s each would be on fifteen-minute alert from sunrise to thirty minutes before sunset. They could be used in Barrel Roll, Steel Tiger, or for SAR rescue combat air patrol missions. The Vientiane embassy made most Bango/Whiplash requests, but airborne aircraft could ask for strikes on targets detected along approved armed reconnaissance routes. (Later, preplanned targets would be added to improve the use of the Bango/Whiplash force.) The Udorn ASOC scrambled the fighters, and gave them the mission's radio frequency, rendezvous instructions, and target information. It also sent CINCPAC and the Bangkok embassy a modified OP–01 report whenever the fighters were launched. No ordnance was dropped in close air support strikes unless a target was marked or the fighters were cleared by the T–28 forward air controllers. Communication between T–28 FACs [redacted] and strike pilots would be via the HU–16 or Victor C–123. Since the Muong Nga incident, the C–123 had to have an RLAF interpreter on board for all missions. T–28s were not needed if the target was on an approved armed reconnaissance route or if the air attaché at Vientiane said forward air controllers were unavailable.[140] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

(S) This Bango/Whiplash expansion came just in time to support a small RLG wet-season offensive in Military Region II to retake the positions around Samneua lost during January and February 1965. Vang Pao's command post and the starting point for this operation was Na Khang (Lima Site 36). Between it and Lima Site 58 lay Keo Fa Mut, a key hill some six thousand feet high. Recognizing the area's importance, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese had set up strong defenses. When the Meo met stiff resistance, more than forty T–28 sorties were flown against this position beginning July 21. These strikes—chiefly with white phosphorous bombs—were controlled by a USAF/[redacted]air liaison officer team, headed by Capt. Keith R. Grimes. Bango/Whiplash aircraft also hit the hilltop with 750-pound bombs. On July 22, the FAR and Meo seized the south slope. Since monitored radio communications indicated that the two North Vietnamese companies on the summit had been ordered to hold to the last man despite acute shortages of food and ammunition, the T–28s and F–4s continued to pound the hill. On one occasion Captain Grimes used four Navy A–6s that were "wandering around" seeking a suitable target. On July 28, RLG forces took Keo Fa Mut without further resistance. The cost to the Laotians were four dead and thirty-three wounded. On the other hand, eighty-three enemy bodies were found, with about forty more still in (b) (1) (b) (3) (S) ALL CIA

139. (S) Msgs, 2d AD to AIG 914, 221752Z May 65, 231404Z May 65, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2558, 231245Z May 65, SECSTATE, 1919, May 25, 1965.

140. (S) Msgs, 2d AD to 23d ABG, *et al*, 130915Z Jul 65; Fact Sheet, MACV, Bango/Whiplash, Aug 16, 1965.

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collapsed foxholes and bunkers. Considering the standard enemy practice of carrying away as many dead as possible and having orders to hold to the end, Vang Pao thought that both companies had been annihilated. However, isolated pockets remained; and as government forces cleared them out, Bango/Whiplash fighters hit several truck parks and the eastern end of Route 6 to keep reinforcements from getting through. By August 17, Vang Pao's troops had mopped up and the Meo general declared the area secure.[141]

Emory C. Swank, Sullivan's deputy in Vientiane, later visited Keo Fa Mut and claimed that it "had to be seen to be believed." Extensive tunnels led to all machinegun and mortar positions, and underground supply depots and command posts with elaborate trench work had been built. The North Vietnamese doubtlessly regarded these positions as impregnable but had not reckoned with air power. Swank reported, Evidence of the telling effect of friendly air bombardment is visible everywhere, especially in the craters fifteen to twenty feet deep and probably twice as wide which covered the mountain tops. The enemy had been literally blasted from his earthworks in a striking affirmation of the role air power can play in close support of ground forces.[142]

The Military Region II forces next pushed along the ridge lines toward Hua Muong (Lima Site 58), and the USAF FAG/ALO teams went with them to control air strikes. However, in the first ten days of September, bad weather grounded many of the T–28s and jets, but this same weather also hampered enemy resupply. The skies broke clear on September 11; and on the 19th, following two days of strafing by T–28s, five hilltops northwest of Hua Muong fell. On September 21, Vang Pao's troops reentered Hua Muong (Lima Site 58) after nearly two months of hard fighting in the precipitous, heavily forested, and inhospitable terrain of northeastern Laos. During the campaign, RLAF T–28s flew 788 sorties and the Bango/Whiplash jets flew 288. Ambassador Sullivan said in a message to Brig. Gen. John R. Murphy (who had replaced Colonel McCreery as deputy commander), that air power broke the back of the enemy. Air power also helped put "aggressive drive into the friendly forces," and Vang Pao was grateful. Then, after adding his own kudos, Sullivan closed with: "We'll try to stir up a little more action on another front in the near future."[143]

141. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2976, 121141Z Aug 65, DIA to AIG 7011, 230130Z Aug 65; intvw, John F. Fuller, AWS historian, with Lt Col Keith R. Grimes, Sep 74; PACAF DI Report, *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Jul 22, 1965 [hereafter cited as *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, with appropriate date].

142. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, A–66, subj: A Visit with General Vang Pao, Sep 21, 1965.

143. *Ibid*; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Sep 2, 1965; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to Dep Comdr/2d AD, 211010Z Sep 65.

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Chapter VII

See-Saw on the Plain (U)

(S) During the summer of 1965, as Vang Pao edged toward Hua Muong (Lima Site 58), Ambassador Sullivan and military authorities spent much time and effort seeking a way to halt communist aerial resupply flights into northeastern Laos. The embassy first got wind of these flights in April, when [redacted] reports suggested a pair of Soviet-built Il–14 aircraft might be making occasional night runs from North Vietnam, one dropping flares and the other dispensing cargo. Since the intelligence was sketchy, it was possible the flares were ground fired and the flights covert 34–Alpha (34–A) missions.[1] Even if they were enemy planes, the chances of catching one in the act seemed pretty slim; Pathet Lao territory was "nasty country" at night, demanding the best navigational equipment and pilot skills. There was also an outside chance the transports were engaged in innocent passage or had Souphanouvong or other Pathet Lao officials on board. If so, Sullivan believed Souvanna would rule out any attempt to down the aircraft. In fact, the very thought of American fighters blazing away at a transport loaded with Pathet Lao very important persons already had Sullivan "spinning his prayer wheel." Nonetheless, as part of the April 17 relaxation of Washington control over air operations, President Johnson approved the use of U.S. aircraft to intercept these flights. His decision was somewhat unusual, catching Sullivan and Souvanna by surprise, for neither had requested it. All in all, however, Sullivan welcomed the President's action.[2]

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(S) Yankee Team photos later confirmed two North Vietnamese Il–14s parked at the Samneua airfield. The country team's consensus was that it was best to attack these planes on the ground, but Souvanna had banned air strikes on the town or airfield and leaned toward the RLAF T–28s flying the mission. He also had prohibited hitting the Il–14s at remote landing sites or in the air since they could be carrying passengers. The only avenue open was to catch the North Vietnamese flagrantly dropping supplies by parachute. For this reason, Souvanna soon reversed his preference for the T–28s (he concluded they might bungle the job) and wondered instead if the Air Force could undertake such "a refined type of intercept."[3]

(S) PACAF thought the mission could be conducted by Souvanna's ground rules but not until precise information on the flights was at hand. Thus, during most of May, the GCI radar sites at Nakhon Phanom and Udorn monitored the Il–14s. They found that the North Vietnamese had now switched to day operations and occasionally flew as far south as the Plain of Jars. By May 23, two fixed routes (with offloading in two northeast areas) were pinpointed. Deeming the warning time for scrambling interceptors sufficient, the 2d Air Division suggested that Bango F–4Cs begin a ground alert at Udorn for this mission on June 1. The air support operations center would launch the F–4Cs in flights of from four to ten, depending on the number of target aircraft airborne and the routes followed. (Enemy flights varied from one to six transports.) Positive identification was to be made prior to any attack, and all intercepts made within Laotian air

1. (S) 34–A operations were covert operations carried out north of the Demilitarized Zone.
2. (S) Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 914, Apr 17, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1689, Apr 19, 1965; memo, Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to Alvin Friedman, ASD/ISA, subj: Duck Soup, Sep 7, 1965.
3. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1725, Apr 23, 1965, 1802, May 4, 1965.

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space. PACAF stressed that the mission had to succeed on the first try. Otherwise, the communists would revert to night operations at once.[4]

(S) Souvanna approved the daylight intercepts—now coded Duck Soup—on June 2. Ground rules laid down by the JCS, Ambassador Sullivan, and the 2d Air Division specified that the North Vietnamese transports must be engaged in aerial supply when taken under fire. For this purpose, four Whiplash F–105s would stand alert at Korat from late afternoon until darkness. If scrambled by the deputy commander's ASOC, they were to fly at low level, staying clear of communist radar, Samneua, and all known flak batteries. The ASOC would monitor 34–A missions and civilian aircraft, feeding the information to the Duck Soup flight so there would be no inadvertent shootdown. In addition, a FAG team from Na Khang (Lima Site 36) would help direct the fighters to the latest enemy resupply [redacted] personnel would send any information directly to the FAG team for retransmitting to the Victor control ship, which would act as a radio relay between the ground and the Duck Soup flight. Direct communication between the interceptors and FAG team was authorized, however.[5] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

(S) Duck Soup ran into snags from the start. The June 5 losses of a Navy F–4 and an Air Force F–105[6] and the subsequent search and rescue pulled the Air America C–123 off alert and into the air. Three days later, Sullivan called on General Moore to substitute the HU–16 Albatross or the Udorn-based HC–54 control ship[7] for the Victor C–123, which was needed to help haul supplies to Lima Site 36 for Vang Pao's summer offensive. No sooner was this switch approved than Sullivan asked that all Duck Soup aircraft stand down until June 21 to place Air America airlift on a full-day rather than a half-day basis. Meantime, the ambassador promised to examine the current intelligence on North Vietnamese aerial resupply. If necessary, he would suggest changes in the current procedures governing alert and control aircraft.[8] By June 18, Sullivan concluded that the Air America airlift could not revert to flying only in the morning. To keep the supplies flowing to Vang Pao and the scattered Meo outposts in Samneua Province, the airline's C–47s had to work into the late afternoon. This cut any chance of a Duck Soup intercept to roughly two hours before sunset and at night. Given these conditions, 2d Air Division recommended the program be canceled.[9]

(S) To save Duck Soup, Sullivan proposed an alternative he felt was practical and relatively simple. It avoided stopping the supply flights and lessened the chances of a "misdirected intercept." Under this plan, only assets in Laos would be used. Two RLAF T–28s would be moved to Vang Pao's Military Region II headquarters at Long Tieng, which had a recently lengthened 4,200-foot runway and excellent communications to Vientiane [redacted] The fighters would be flown by Air America pilots thoroughly familiar with the terrain and (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

ALL CIA

4. (S) Msgs, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 291935Z May 65, 13th AF, 311235Z May 65.

5. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 1950, Jun 2, 1965, 2d AD to 6234th TFW, Dep Comdr/2d AD, *et al*, 030853Z Jun 65, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 2621, 030950Z Jun 65, 2626, 041212Z Jun 65.

6. (S) Sullivan described June 5 as "another day of fun and games which included such features as an F–105 pilot parachuting into the suburbs of Vientiane and checking into the Embassy for a change of clothes and a ride home." [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, date-time group blurred.]

7. (S) Three HC–54s on rotational temporary duty from Guam and Tachikawa AB, Japan, had just arrived at Udorn to assume the HU–16's duties. The HU–16s were soon transferred to Da Nang and limited to missions in the Gulf of Tonkin. The HC–54s, with their higher ceilings, were better suited for operating over the mountainous terrain of northern Laos; but they were not properly equipped to act as a flying command post, lacking adequate backup communications and special control equipment for assuming effective direction of a search and rescue mission. In December 1965, two HC–130Hs arrived as replacements for the HC–54s, which were phased out by April 1966. [Capt B. Conn Anderson, USAF, *USAF Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 1961–1966* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), pp 42–43.]

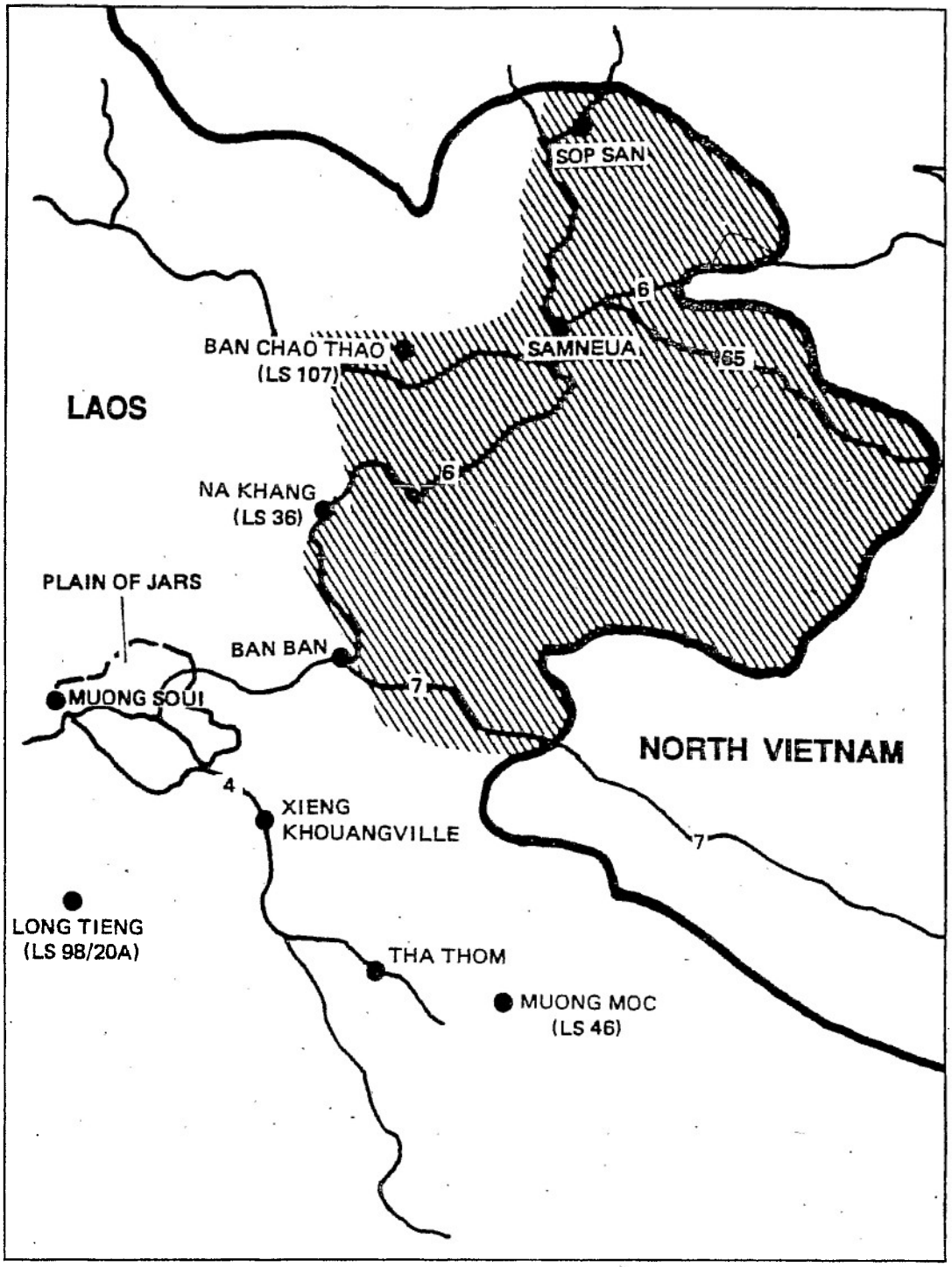
8. (S) Msgs, Dep Comdr/2d AD to 2d AD, 080913Z Jun 65, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 110030Z Jun 65, AmEmb Vientiane to 2d AD, 111110Z Jun 65, CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, 160006Z Jun 65.

9. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to 2d AD, SECSTATE, 2047, Jun 18, 1965, SECSTATE, 2079, Jun 25, 1965.

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Duck Soup Operating Area



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operating conditions in northern Laos. They would be given enemy aircraft identification training before deployment. Their planes, armed only with .50-caliber machineguns, would stand daily alert until five in the evening, when they would take off from Long Tieng and be in the vicinity of the most recent sightings within twenty minutes. They would then loiter to dusk before flying back to Udorn. If a North Vietnamese transport was seen, the T–28s would give chase but withhold fire until the FAG team at Lima Site 36 approved. Since Souvanna had agreed to Duck Soup, Sullivan envisioned no problem in getting him to accept this modified plan but did not foresee the State Department's opposition.[10]

(S) Leonard Unger, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, put Sullivan on notice that State was not willing to run the risk of Americans flying T–28s in Laos, except during an emergency search and rescue mission in planes marked with U.S. insignia. He thought the use of Laotian [redacted] for Duck Soup should be explored. With all the pilots trained by Water Pump, surely Sullivan could find two such individuals. Like Air America personnel, they should undergo intensive aircraft identification training before being sent to Long Tieng. To make sure the Laotian [redacted] fully understood the instructions passed to them, Unger suggested stationing reliable interpreters in the Vientiane air operations center and with the forward air guide at Lima Site 36. Lastly, the former ambassador said there was no evidence of Soviet involvement in the airlift; but if their participation became evident, all intercepts were forbidden.[11] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

(S) The Joint Chiefs reminded Admiral Sharp that Duck Soup had been laid on by the "highest authority," and that he and Ambassador Sullivan should come up with a solution, preferably one not using U.S. personnel. Sharp, however, sided with Sullivan; it was better for American pilots to tackle such a sensitive undertaking than the Laotians [redacted] If an American pilot was shot down, the admiral felt the chances of his falling into the wrong hands could be reduced by enlarging the search and rescue force during all Duck Soup operations.[12] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

(S) Meanwhile, Colonel Tyrrell and General Murphy had a back-to-the-drawing-board session at Udorn, trying to hammer out a plan acceptable to Washington. The air attaché and deputy commander decided to substitute Bango F–4Cs for the T–28s. The Udorn jets would pull ground alert beginning at five each evening, allowing Air America time to complete resupply missions in northeast Laos before having to clear the area. If the Lima Site 36 forward air controller did not call for a scramble, the F–4s would take off at dusk for an airborne alert in the general vicinity of Na Khang. If a North Vietnamese transport showed up and sufficient light remained for a positive identification before making a firing pass, the FAC would call in the F–4s. (Tyrrell and Murphy also held that the A–1Es were just as reliable for this type mission as jets.)[13]

ALL CIA

(S) After consulting with Ambassador Sullivan on July 18, Admiral Sharp again stated that the best solution was to station two T–28s with Air America pilots at Long Tieng and to follow the format sketched out by the ambassador, including the additional SAR forces. Tyrrell's and Murphy's F–4 proposal was acceptable, since it also included American personnel. Sharp thought it was time for the Joint Chiefs to convince the State Department to modify its objections to Air America pilots flying intercept missions. The chiefs dropped the impasse into McNamara's lap in the hope he could talk Secretary of State Rusk into reconsidering.[14]

(S) Over the next month, Washington reviewed the intercept problem. On August 24, Undersecretary of State George W. Ball expressed strong reservations about these missions,

10. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2079, Jun 25, 1965.
11. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1121, Jun 30, 1965.
12. (S) Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 5168, 031650Z Jul 65, CINCPAC to AmEmb Vientiane, 032317Z Jul 65.
13. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 18, Jul 6, 1965.
14. (S) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 180035Z Jul 65; memo, Blouin to Friedman, Sep 7, 1965.

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particularly when the last sighting (from a non-American source, at that) had been on June 21. Furthermore, the Pentagon was troubled over the number of aircraft that would be tied down on alert. The State Department's stance compelled Sullivan to closely reexamine Duck Soup. Although enemy transports were spotted on July 15 (several at night), July 25 (two in the late afternoon), and on August 10 (several at night), he now deemed the flights too few to justify a full-time alert. The downturn in sightings was partially attributed to poor weather, but GCI radars showed that the North Vietnamese had gone back to flying chiefly at night. Since there were no all-weather interceptors in the theater he could call on, the ambassador sought discretionary authority to trigger Duck Soup when sightings and conditions warranted. He did not say if he would use the T–28s or F–4s but agreed to keep Washington informed. On September 2, Admiral Sharp endorsed Sullivan's position.[15]

Three weeks passed with no action on Sullivan's request. Finally, at the urging of the JCS, McNamara approached Rusk on September 24. He was told that Sullivan would not receive this authority because the drops had fallen off and were almost entirely at night. State further pointed out that, over the past five months, neither Souvanna nor any other RLG official had raised the resupply subject with the ambassador. The matter might logically be expected to come up if the airlift was hurting the Royal Laotian Government. In addition, it would be hard under international law for Washington to claim prisoner-of-war status for Air America pilots since they were actually U.S. civilians. If captured, they might be treated as "unprivileged belligerents," and capture would confirm to the communists the paramilitary nature of Air America. This information was furnished Sullivan on the 28th, but the State Department wanted him to understand it had not closed the door to using Air America pilots in T–28 intercepts. If enemy aerial resupply resumed in force, the decision would be reexamined.[16]

Sullivan realized that State was set against Duck Soup. In early October, when Maj. Gen. Ouane Rathikone, RLA Chief of Staff, reported that Il–14s were making occasional daylight drops in Luang Prabang Province from the general area of Dien Bien Phu, Sullivan did not ask for reactivation of the intercepts. Instead, he promised Ouane he would see if U.S. strikes could be cycled against Dien Bien Phu in the hope of catching some of the transports on the ground. However, when the ambassador sent the information to COMUSMACV, it was in an almost offhand manner—if Westmoreland had a few spare aircraft he did not have targets for, he might find it profitable to schedule them against the Dien Bien Phu airfield.[17]

Duck Soup was not considered again, and an incident in South Vietnam in mid-September may have had a bearing on this, even though the incident was not mentioned in any State Department cables to Sullivan. Two F–100s made a pass so close to an ICC C–46 that the startled commission pilot nearly lost control of his plane. The ICC sent a strong protest to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and the 2d Air Division investigated the matter. Although the pilots were cleared, State could not understand how Air Force fighters could intercept an aircraft that had "ICC" stenciled in large letters on the wing and fuselage. If this could happen in the clear weather and broad daylight of South Vietnam, the chances for mistakes were much higher in Laos where the weather was poor and there were innumerable nonmilitary flights, including two a week between Hanoi and Vientiane. Since the intercepts were limited to the late afternoon and twilight, the odds against positive identification and for an inadvertent shootdown were far higher. The near miss in South Vietnam may well have ended any State Department endorsement of Duck Soup.

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15. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 130, Aug 24, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220, Aug 28, 1965, CINCPAC to JCS, 020537Z Sep 65.
16. Memo, SECDEF to CJCS, subj: Enemy Resupply Activity Northern Laos Duck Soup, Sep 24, 1965; msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 192, Sep 28, 1965.
17. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 330, Oct 4, 1965.

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[redacted]

The War in Northern Laos

If Admiral Sharp thought that back in February he had satisfied Ambassador Sullivan's need for H–34s, he was too optimistic. In early June, Sullivan told the DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, Col. Jack G. Cornett, USA, that the Air America helicopter fleet needed to be increased to twenty-six H–34s due to SAR commitments. Nevertheless, the worldwide shortage of these machines persisted, and those that could be found were costly to maintain. Even if Air America got the helicopters, it had to find qualified flying personnel or train the pilots from scratch. Moreover, the required expansion of the airline's Udorn facilities would not be cheap. Cornett concluded that if the H–34 remained the backbone of the Air America fleet, the U.S. effort in Laos was in trouble.[18]

Two USAF CH–3Cs arrived in Thailand on July 5, and Cornett proposed that the embassy authorize the use of those aircraft for SAR in northern Laos (CH–3Cs had already been approved for SAR over North Vietnam). Unlike the HH–43s, there was no need to pre-position these two machines at remote lima sites. If an aircraft was lost in Laos, Cornett envisioned the nearest H–34 or CH–3 flying to the rescue. It would most likely be a CH–3, since one would be on ground alert at Nakhon Phanom during all planned missions. By using the CH–3s, extra H–34s would not be needed for Air America, which could use the sixteen it had for cargo hauling, and the Udorn facilities would not require expansion. All told, a lot of Laos MAP funds could be saved.[19]

Cornett was well aware of Sullivan's reluctance to use the Air Force and his high esteem for Air America. He admitted that the airline pilots that had been there for some time knew the area better than their USAF counterparts, but training and orientation flights could overcome this handicap. Moreover, new Air America pilots were no different than USAF types; both came to Laos without local experience and both had to learn the country. Admiral Sharp at once threw his weight behind Cornett. At a July 9 meeting between embassy and deputy chief personnel, Vientiane's representatives sided with the military.[20]

Even though country team members opted for USAF SAR helicopters in Laos, Ambassador Sullivan still preferred Air America. He realized that sooner or later he would have to accept USAF HH–43s and/or CH–3s for SAR in this area on a "first-come, first-served basis;" but before giving in on this touchy subject, the ambassador wanted Washington's guidance. In the interim, he discussed the matter at Udorn with Colonel Cornett and Lt. Gen. Paul S. Emrick, PACOM Chief of Staff. They agreed that, for the time being, the final decision would be left hanging. Sullivan also accepted an interim limit of twenty-one for the H–34s.[21]

Two HH–43s and two CH–3Cs were at Nakhon Phanom, two HH–43s were at Udorn, and six HH–3s were due to arrive in Thailand during September and October. As soon as the crews for the HH–3s were checked out, the HH–43s and CH–3s would be withdrawn from Thailand. Wanting to "explore all alternatives," Washington asked Sullivan to clarify if these Thai-based USAF helicopters would do SAR from bases in Thailand and land in Laos just to refuel or would they stand ground alert at various lima sites. If the latter were the case, Washington wanted to know what sites were involved, what the risks of exposure were, if it would be wiser to limit the Air Force to flying SAR only in Steel Tiger and North Vietnam, and if Souvanna had been consulted or his permission obtained for USAF rescue operations in northern Laos?[22]

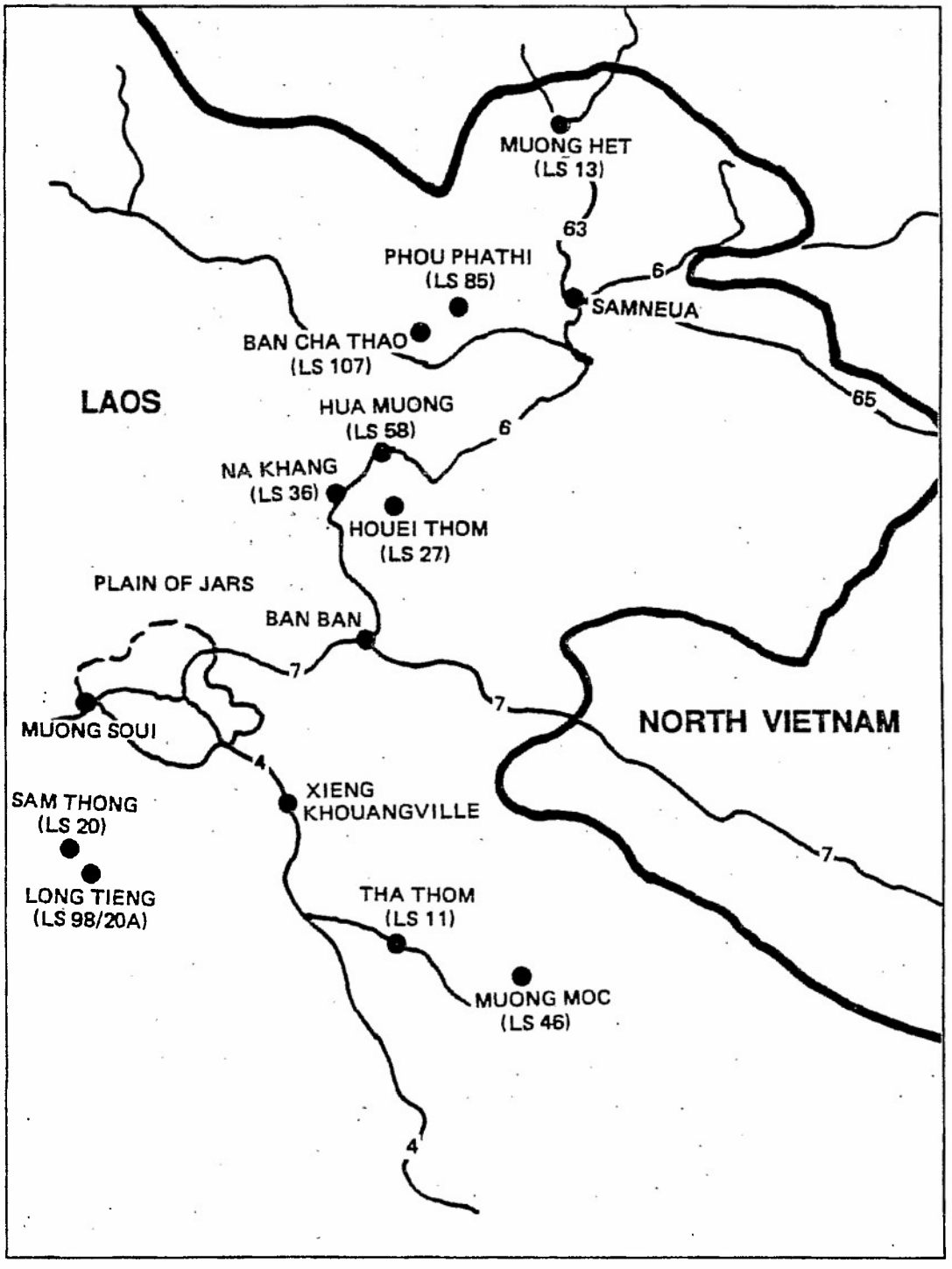
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18. Msg, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 070900Z Jul 65. In this message, Colonel Cornett repeated to Admiral Sharp a cable he had sent to Ambassador Sullivan.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid*; msgs, CINCPAC (Adm Sharp) to AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan), 072228Z Jul 65, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 091205Z Jul 65.
21. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 21, Jul 13, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 130711Z Jul 65.
22. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 56, Jul 21, 1965.

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Lima Sites in Northeastern Laos



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(U) Emory C. Swank, Sullivan's deputy in Vientiane, replied that for now the embassy wanted the CH–3s to stand ground alert and be used in North Vietnam. Fuel for them and for the HH–43s had already been shipped to Na Khang, Muong Moc, and Ban Cha Thao (Lima Sites 36, 46, and 107). These were isolated sites "in areas closed to itinerant travelers, including journalists," and the risk of exposure was slight. In particular, Lima Site 36 was sufficiently defended and equipped to permit helicopters and crews either to be permanently based there or rotated back to Thailand once a week.[23] Feeding or housing the crew was no problem, but a small maintenance contingent (not to exceed nine) was needed. An Air America pilot familiar with the area would be sent to Na Khang to act as navigator for SAR missions until the Air Force pilots were proficient. Lima Site 36's location made it an ideal quick reaction base for SAR in western North Vietnam and for northern and central Laos as well. In fact, Swank now proposed releasing the H–34s from all SAR work and employing them exclusively for high-priority airlift. They would fly a rescue mission only if they happened to be closer to the downed pilot than the USAF helicopter. Swank thought he would have little trouble getting approval from Souvanna once the prime minister was told the changes were dictated by the rising tempo of air strikes against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese.[24]

(U) On August 5, 1965, Washington decided that due to "political factors" Air America would continue all search and rescue work in the Barrel Roll area. USAF helicopters based in Thailand would be used in North Vietnam and could be pre-positioned on the ground at Lima Site 36 for this purpose. No pre-positioning was approved for Sites 46 and 107; they would serve solely for helicopter refueling. No personnel or USAF-marked aircraft were to stay overnight at Site 36 or anywhere else in Laos. Washington did leave the embassy a loophole: "Thailand-based USAF-marked helicopters may be used in extremis for SAR missions in Laos, operating from either Site 36 or directly from bases in Thailand."[25] In other words, if it came down to a choice between an American pilot being captured and imprisoned or the Air Force flying a SAR in enemy-controlled Laos to save him, the rescue always took precedence. Instead of denying Swank's basic request, Washington discreetly gave it a stamp of approval.

(U) During the next two weeks, local bad weather and the absence of navigational aids in northern Laos hampered Detachment 1, 38th Air Rescue Squadron, in maintaining its alert at Lima Site 36. Several times its helicopters could not reach the site. With the weather clear in North Vietnam, however, Rolling Thunder sorties often flew without any SAR forces pre-positioned in Laos for a quick response. The 2d Air Division urged that the ground rules be changed to permit the CH–3s to stay overnight at Na Khang and escape Thailand's marginal weather. To keep a low American profile at the site, the aircraft and crews would have "convertible sheep-dipping." Under this scheme, the helicopters would fly into Laos and stand alert without any national markings, the crews wearing Air America-type clothing without insignia or identification. USAF decals and uniforms would be locked inside the aircraft and readily available for any mission over North Vietnam. Hence, the 38th Squadron could take on a "local coloration" while in Laos and revert to USAF status once over North Vietnam. Since Vang Pao's Hua Muong offensive had pushed the defensive perimeter of Site 36 out thirteen miles, Ambassador Sullivan did not fear American exposure and endorsed the 2d Air Division's request.[26]

(U) While Washington was mulling over this new development, an F–105 was shot down just inside North Vietnam on August 28. The pilot was still missing two days later, chiefly because

23. (U) This was the first time anyone had suggested keeping helicopters in Laos overnight. All previous discussion centered on having them return to Thailand around dusk.
24. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 94, Jul 22, 1965.
25. (S) Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 92, Aug 5, 1965.
26. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 194, Aug 20, 1965.

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of the bad weather that delayed departure of the SAR helicopters from Nakhon Phanom. This incident clearly showed the importance of staging the machines to Lima Site 36 in adverse weather. Sullivan once more pressed Washington for approval of the 2d Air Division's request.[27]

On August 31, Washington agreed to allow the CH–3s to remain overnight at Na Khang. This approval rested on the strength of Sullivan's assurance that security at Site 36 was adequate. If it deteriorated, the State and Defense Departments reserved the right to review their action. In truth, it was strongly suggested that the 38th Squadron's helicopters not shuttle to Na Khang if the weather in Thailand was satisfactory. Washington also wanted a detailed plan and expressed two serious reservations about sheep-dipping the crews. First, discovery of this ruse would bring on a far messier public relations problem than simply admitting that the Air Force was operating in Laos. Second, if the crew was captured, the ruse would be obvious and might make prisoner-of-war treatment harder to claim. However, Washington was willing to listen, if Sullivan thought that sheep-dipping the crews was essential.[28]

The plan the ambassador submitted did not specify sheep-dipping and had just five USAF personnel (pilot, copilot, engineer, and two medics) staying overnight at Lima Site 36. They would carry USAF identification cards and wear standard flight clothing without insignia. Rotation would be every three days, the crews bringing their food for this period; and the helicopters would bear American markings in flight. However, these markings would be removed at Site 36 to minimize the risk of a casual identification, and ground personnel would be brought into the country only to do emergency maintenance. Sullivan promised a continuous review of the site's security and, in what was a highly unusual position for him, said he did not think it necessary to inform Souvanna of these arrangements.[29] The Pathet Lao shelled several outposts ringing the site, a week after the USAF CH–3s started full-time operation from Na Khang, but Sullivan did not believe the mortar attacks were triggered by the presence of the helicopters on the site. The site was one of Vang Pao's main bases and a center of Air America resupply operations—it was a logical target, with or without the USAF presence. The FAR and Meo quickly followed up with reinforcements; but the ambassador conceded the risk, while sharply reduced, was not eliminated. Nevertheless, the benefits of pre-positioning and maintaining the helicopters and their crews overnight outweighed any thoughts of ending the alert.[30]

The State Department did not completely share the ambassador's confidence over the security at Site 36 and reviewed the various cover stories developed for helicopter operations following the attack. The result was a course of action to be followed if a CH–3 were shot down or crashed in North Vietnam. If this happened, the press would simply be briefed that a helicopter had been lost while flying a humanitarian search and rescue mission and further comment declined on the grounds that additional information would endanger future rescue efforts. However, if the Pathet Lao attacked and overran Lima Site 36 and captured a CH–3 and/or its crew, exposure of the complete picture of USAF use of the site from captured personnel and the POL stores was possible. The cover story (the helicopter had been forced to make an emergency landing during a humanitarian mission and was captured while making repairs) would not be credible in the light of this condemning evidence, raising the question of why was the United States flying search and rescue in Laos in the first place. Since SAR was an adjunct to strike operations, the United States and the Royal Laotian Government would be placed in the embarrassing position of having to admit violating the Geneva accords.

27. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 223, Aug 30, 1965.
28. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 140, Aug 31, 1965.
29. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 249, Sep 7, 1965. Sullivan already had Souvanna's permission to stage the Air America H–34s to Site 36. Lacking any outward identification, the USAF crews bore a striking similarity to the airline's pilots and could easily be passed off as nonmilitary crewmen.
30. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 285, Sept 16, 1965.

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Consequently, State suggested that if Na Khang fell to the communists, spokesmen should admit a helicopter had been captured while engaged in search and rescue and refuse to say anything more because of the jeopardy to future rescues. Removal of the crew insignia and markings was out since it would be inconsistent with this line.[31]

Ambassador Sullivan continued to contend that the chances of the Pathet Lao overrunning Site 36 and capturing a CH–3 and its crew were "extremely remote." If they did, the best course was to acknowledge it publicly and explain that Americans were in Laos because of a humanitarian SAR mission. Should a crew or helicopter be captured, the presence or absence of crew insignia and aircraft markings was immaterial. The ambassador additionally recognized that the pre-positioned fuel drums were inconsistent with any cover story. The best bet, he said, was to stick to the line that the 38th Air Rescue Squadron was on a search and rescue mission, then decline further comment.[32] Fortunately, there was a lull in communist attacks on Lima Site 36 [it was merely the calm before the storm] and the State Department's anxieties subsided.

During October, however, the shortcomings of the CH–3s in search and rescue became apparent. They surpassed the HH–43s and H–34s in range and speed, but their lack of armor plating raised the odds against survival in combat. On November 5, a CH–3 from Site 36 was sent into North Vietnam to look for an A–1E that been conducting an electronic search for a downed F–105. When it arrived in the area where the A–1 went down, the CH–3 was hit by ground fire and the crew bailed out. A Navy rescue helicopter en route to the scene was also struck by ground fire and made an emergency landing in North Vietnam. The second CH–3 was on its way to the first site when it got word of the Navy aircraft in distress. It diverted and, aided by other Navy helicopters, rescued all the crewmen. None of the ships had enough fuel to fly to the other crash site. Eventually, the SAR for the first CH–3 was called off and the crew was listed as missing.[33]

The loss of the CH–3 in North Vietnam raised questions in Sullivan's mind about cover stories for downed and captured crewmen. He knew that under the Geneva Convention such individuals need only give name, rank, and serial number; but he also knew that the communists had ways of making prisoners talk. It could be highly compromising to the Royal Thailand Government and Royal Laotian Government (not to mention the United States) if a captured crewman confessed he was operating out of Thailand or Laos. He wanted to know if it was possible for General Moore to tell his people that, if captured, they should say their operating base was Da Nang or elsewhere in South Vietnam. Sullivan sought Moore's comments and "a standard line we can all stick to in the event of future shootdowns with the likelihood the crew was captured."[34]

Neither Moore nor Harris had ever cared for cover stories. When Moore passed Sullivan's request to General McConnell, the Air Force Chief of Staff left no doubt in anyone's mind where he stood. To McConnell, it was one thing for the State Department, Defense Department, or CIA to come up with cover stories as pap for the public or newsmen, but quite another to ask captured flyers to go along. For some time, all airmen had been trained to rigidly adhere to the Code of Conduct, which did not provide for cover stories. When Moore transmitted McConnell's strong views to Sullivan, he closed with: "We can recommend no other course of action."[35]

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31. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 188, Sep 25, 1965.
32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 319, Sep 28, 1965.
33. Ltr, Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, to Comdr, 2d AD, subj: SAR Mission (6 Nov 65), n.d., in hist, 38th ARS, Oct–Dec 65, Doc 7.
34. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to 2d AD (Maj Gen Moore), SECSTATE, 465, Nov 8, 1965.
35. Msg, 2d AD (Major Gen Moore) to AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan), 120133Z Nov 65, retransmitted as msg, PACAF to CINCPAC, 140519Z Nov 65.

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The American contribution to the war in northern Laos had slipped into the shadow of the more visible conflict in South and North Vietnam. Nowhere was this more clearly illustrated than in the growing public awareness of events in Southeast Asia. In October 1965, a rash of articles appeared in American journals depicting the bombing of North Vietnam by Thai-based American planes. When interdiction missions on the trails in southern Laos resumed in the following months, they fast became the worst kept secret of the war. A visiting congressman told reporters the United States was bombing Viet Cong supply lines in Laos as well as "hitting them on the ground," moving the Russian ambassador in Vientiane to raise the question with Sullivan for the first time; and a *New York Times* story early in December related MACV plans to intensify the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.[36]

These reports heightened the dilemma faced by Washington and Sullivan. American operations were being carried out with the approval of Souvanna (at times, at his request). The prime minister could never admit this because he wished to preserve Laos' neutral status as best he could. He insisted on secrecy, and cover stories seemed the best way to achieve it. Even the Russian ambassador indicated to Souvanna and Sullivan that his government was willing to wink at United States' operations in Laos if they were not officially acknowledged.[37] Too much public disclosure, however, threatened this frail balance.

All through these reports, there were no references to Barrel Roll or American air power supporting Royal Laotian Government ground forces. The December 13 issue of the *National Observer* printed a full-page story on Laos, complete with a map prominently outlining the Plain of Jars but not one word on any U.S. air strikes in that area. Perhaps the reporters who knew of Vang Pao, the Meo, Water Pump, and the search and rescue force saw it as "small potatoes," a side show to the main events in North and South Vietnam. Whatever the reasons, they did not file stories on the actions in northern Laos as they had done in 1960 and 1962 or when Kong Le was being driven back to Muong Soui. To the Americans involved in this area, it was just as well. They were not in the limelight and could work relatively unencumbered as long as they stayed within the guidelines established by Souvanna and Sullivan. The single stipulation seems to have been that what they saw and did there, stayed there. Things were not to be discussed except with people that had an absolute "need-to-know." Little wonder then, that the war in northern Laos was soon spoken of (if at all) as "The Silent War," or "The War That Never was." Ambassador Sullivan, as can be seen from his cables, aimed to keep it that way.

From the moment he arrived in Laos, Sullivan had been deeply concerned over the numerous short rounds attributed to U.S. aircraft. In nearly all cases, investigating boards concluded that the major cause was the failure of the pilots to know precisely where they were relative to friendly positions. By the beginning of the 1965–66 dry season, Sullivan looked for bombing mistakes in the panhandle to decline due to the coverage afforded by the radar at Nakhon Phanom and at Da Nang. On the other hand, Kong Le was planning his perennial try for Phou Kout mountain and Vang Pao was defending his isolated lima sites and was also seeking to keep what had been wrested from the communists during the recent wet season. These Royal Laotian Government actions demanded more RLAF and USAF "flying artillery" and close air support sorties. Further, MACV intended to quicken the armed reconnaissance program, especially at night, and Rolling Thunder aircraft with unexpended ordnance could now hit fixed targets validated by the RLAF on the leg back home. To Sullivan, this increased air activity

36. Msgs, COMUSMACTHAI (Maj Gen Stilwell) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 091305Z Oct 65, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 735, Oct 16, 1965; msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 386, Dec 11, 1965; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 587, Nov 30, 1965; *New York Times*, Dec 4, 1965; msg, ASD/ISA to JCS, *et al*, 102012Z Dec 65.

37. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to SECSTATE (Bundy), 687, Dec 27, 1965, retransmitted as msg, CJCS to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 271729Z Dec 65.

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seemed ripe for more accidental bombing in Barrel Roll, even though short rounds there had been rare. The ambassador grew quite uneasy.[38]

(S) Sullivan knew that placing a navigational aid in the country would assist aircrews in fixing their position. Out of the ambassador's discussion with General McConnell and his staff came the decision to locate a tacan station somewhere in Samneua Province. An automatic device, the tacan did not require permanent servicing, just an occasional visit by a maintenance technician. Personnel of the USAF 1st Mobile Communications Group surveyed several locales and settled on Lima Site 27 (Houei Thom) with Lima Site 36 (Na Khang) as an alternate. Because of the logistic lag, they suggested a TRN–17 tacan now in boxes at Udorn. Unfortunately, this portable set needed the constant presence of two technicians. For this task, they suggested sheep-dipped Air Force enlisted men. Sullivan deferred action on the project due to Washington's well-known sensitivity to placing Americans in forward areas. (Site 27 had been attacked several times but never overrun.) On October 23, 1965, however, the ambassador asked that the project be given a high priority. He was sure of Souvanna's approval since the RLAF T–28s could use it for navigation as well. (Actually, the RLAF T–28s required additional radio equipment to use the tacan.) General Westmoreland added his endorsement, noting that the navigational aid would be a boon to the 34–Alpha crews flying into North Vietnam at night.[39]

(S) It was not until November 27 that Washington assented to a tacan in Laos and the modification of the T–28s so the RLAF could use it. If Souvanna consented, the TRN–17 was to be located at Lima Site 36, not Lima Site 27. Air Force personnel could install it and perform periodic maintenance, provided they were attached for that purpose to the air attaché office at Vientiane. No permission was given for the airmen to perform day-to-day operations. These were to be done by [redacted] the Laotian civil aviation branch, or Air America. If Sullivan had no such individuals, he was to get them. Their availability was to coincide with the equipment's installation.[40]

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(S) [redacted] the friendly village of Ban Nam Hiang was hit by U.S. jets for the third time, twice on successive days. Col. Paul A. Pettigrew,[41] air attaché at Vientiane, flew at once to Savannakhet for a talk with Thao Ma while an embassy team went to Ban Nam Hiang. Though no one in the village was seriously injured, Sullivan was quite upset. He had relaxed the operating rules in July and September, but at no time were villages to be struck unless on the RLAF-approved list. "Either someone is not getting the word," he told General Westmoreland, "or else the word is being conspicuously ignored."[42]

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ALL CIA + STATE

(S) The next day, as the Laotian cabinet discussed the attack on Ban Nam Hiang, Generals Westmoreland and Moore flew to Udorn to confer with Sullivan. The Americans agreed a tacan was needed to cover Steel Tiger. A South Vietnam location was out, however, because friendly forces controlled no high ground across the panhandle border, and the tacan would have to be put in Laos. Thao Ma had already suggested Phou Kate mountain near Saravane in southern Laos and asked that USAF and not Thai personnel man the equipment. If Americans were used, they would have to be sheep-dipped USAF airmen with Air America cover or genuine civilians recruited by the Department of Defense or the Central Intelligence Agency. The airmen were preferred since USAF personnel were already staying overnight at Lima Site 36 in the search and rescue helicopters. The two tacan technicians, either in mufti or as sheep-dipped Air America

38. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 404, Oct 23, 1965.
39. (S) *Ibid*; msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 251125Z Oct 65.
40. (S) Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 340, Nov 27, 1965.
41. (S) Colonel Pettigrew had succeeded Colonel Tyrrell as Vientiane air attaché in July 1965.
42. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 020715Z Dec 65, SECSTATE, 634, Dec 10, 1965.

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employees, could be stationed there without making the U.S. presence any more obvious. They could live with and be supported by the HH–3s (which had replaced the CH–3s), and they would appear to be part of the search and rescue group. This same cover could be adopted by tacan personnel at Phou Kate mountain. The conferees summed up: "Our thought is that they would enter and leave Laos 'black' and wear civilian clothes in the same manner [as] USAF ordnance loaders in Vientiane and Savannakhet. Alternatively, they would be sheep-dipped as Air America technicians."[43]

(b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA

Washington informed Sullivan on December 14 that it still favored native personnel to handle the tacan's everyday operation and he should speed [redacted] recruiting and arrange for any technical training. When working at the two sites, [redacted] would be sheep-dipped as Laotian civil aviation personnel. However, training would take time and the navigational aids were urgently needed. Consequently, two USAF airmen at each site, disguised as Air America employees, would operate the equipment until the [redacted] were ready. If the latter's availability was delayed more than six weeks, Washington would arrange for civilian contract technicians under Air America cover to replace the airmen.[44]

(b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA & STATE

At this time, twenty-seven [redacted] enlisted men were being trained by the air section of JUSMAGTHAI to man five tacan sites in Thailand. If the [redacted] agreed [redacted] Sullivan could draw from this group. These men had a good grasp of English and electronic theory but were short on tacan experience. Their USAF instructors estimated they would need between ten and sixteen weeks of intensive training on a working TRN–17, followed by two weeks on-the-job-training at the Laotian sites. As soon as the Air Force made the money and training facilities available, it was judged that another four months were required before [redacted] could staff the sites.[45]

(b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA

Since four months was far too long, the Joint Chiefs on December 28 told Admiral Sharp to furnish contractor technicians under Air America cover. These men were to replace the USAF teams within six weeks after the tacans were installed, to be succeeded in turn [redacted] as soon as they were qualified. Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, USA, Chairman of the JCS, then in Southeast Asia, urged that everything be done to "get this worthwhile show on the road." However, ground action was heating up—Lima Site 36 no longer appeared safe (the search and rescue helicopters had been withdrawn to Long Tieng)—and the security of Phou Kate mountain was in doubt. Thus, by the end of 1965, none of the tacans were in place and the chances of putting one in the Barrel Roll area seemed quite slim.[46]

(b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA

In early January, Thao Ma arranged for a FAR battalion to be camped near Phou Kate, and fears over security there were allayed. On January 6, after conferring with Ambassador Martin and Generals Westmoreland and Moore at Udorn, Sullivan approved the immediate installation of a tacan on the mountain. Maj. Gen. Charles R. Bond, Jr. (who had replaced General Murphy as Deputy Commander, 2d Air Division/Thirteenth Air Force) was designated the "action agent." He was to supervise the sheep-dipping of the 1st Mobile Communications Group airmen, prepare the site, and set up the tacan. MACV would furnish the U.S. Army CH–54s heavy helicopters to move the gear from Udorn to Phou Kate. By January 11, the

43. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 605, Dec 3, 1965, 610, Dec 4, 1965, 634, Dec 10, 1965, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 3861, 051219Z Dec 65, COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), Info Amb Sullivan, 100442Z Dec 65.

44. Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 389, Dec 14, 1965, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 648, Dec 15, 1965.

45. Msgs, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 1187, Dec 16, 1965, 1226, Dec 23, 1965.

46. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 9466, 282320Z Dec 65, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, Dep Comdr, 2d AD, 3955, 240647Z Dec 65, COMUSMACTHAI (CJCS) to JCS, 251220Z Dec 65; hist, 1974th Comm Gp, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1966, p 84.

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[redacted]

TRN–17 was assembled on the mountain top and the "cooking-in" process had begun. Two days later, the equipment had been flight tested and was on the air as channel 72.[47]

(S) Because of the precarious situation at Lima Site 36, it was agreed that an alternate location was needed for northern Laos. By January 26, survey teams of the 1st Mobile Communications Group recommended Skyline Ridge adjacent to Lima Site 20 (Sam Thong). The Skyline site promised good reception for aircraft—it was six thousand feet in elevation—but its southern location meant its coverage was not as much as Lima Site 36's. From a tactical standpoint, the latter was still the most practical place to put a tacan; but the situation at Na Khang was "not exactly comparable to Waikiki," and the embassy could give no guarantee the site would not be overrun. By February 17, the tacan at Skyline was in operation (although intermittently, due to a balky power amplifier), just in time to aid USAF fighter-bombers defending Lima Site 36 from a North Vietnamese attack. Three days after the tacan at Skyline was working, the first contingent of technicians from the Federal Electric Corporation arrived at Udorn. On February 25, Sullivan gave approval for additional SSB radios and USAF maintenance personnel from the 1973d Communications Squadron at Udorn to enter Laos. By March, they had set up a direct air request net between Udorn's tactical air control center, the Vientiane and Savannakhet air operations centers, and the Seventh Air Force at Tan Son Nhut.[48]

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(S) In mid-October 1965, Pathet Lao deserters claimed that five new North Vietnamese battalions were bivouacked near Ban Ban. This raised the estimated enemy order of battle in northern Laos to between nine thousand and ten thousand men. Roadwatch teams saw communist engineers feverishly working to repair and improve Route 7 in the north and Routes 12 and 23 in the central panhandle. Aerial resupply in Samneua and the Plain of Jars also picked up. Between October 2 and 12, seventeen unidentified transports were sighted, all making drops at night. These actions indicated the communists planned to renew their efforts in the coming dry season to clear Route 6 and attempt to wipe out the isolated FAR and Meo pockets in Samneua and Xieng Khouang Provinces. During the first three weeks of October, the [redacted] countered with 300 Barrel Roll sorties, while the Air Force and Navy flew 285. In addition, Bango/Whiplash flew another 43 sorties in reply to FAR direct air support requests.[49]

(S) Vang Pao wound up his limited wet-season campaign on October 23, terming it a success, and the neutralists apparently decided it was their turn. On November 10, Lt. Col. Sing Chanthakouman, the commander at Muong Soui, suddenly announced he was going to retake Phou Kout. To root out enemy bunkers on the mountain, he wanted U.S. jets armed with 750-pound bombs. Colonel Pettigrew passed a request for twenty-four sorties to the 2d Air Division for November 11, anticipating several more days of strikes with sixteen sorties a day. This abrupt assault on Phou Kout, which should have been coordinated beforehand to assure proper air support, caught the 2d Air Division short handed. To meet Colonel Sing's request, the division had to divert sorties from fixed targets and to scramble Bango/Whiplash aircraft.[50]

(S) For the next three days, U.S. jets pounded Phou Kout, hoping to reduce the enemy bunkers to a point where the neutralists could seize and keep this long-standing enemy

47. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 718, Jan 6, 1966, 2d AD to 1st Mbl Comm Gp, 060911Z, Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, to CINCPACAF, 061105Z Jan 66, 110336Z Jan 66, CINCPAC to JCS, 110340Z Jan 66. Since this facility was used chiefly for tactical support, it was not listed in any unclassified flight publications. [Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 220131Z Mar 66.]

48. (S) Msgs, Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, to CINCPACAF, 261112Z Jan 66, 141028Z Feb 66, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 171025Z Feb 66.

49. (S) Msgs, ADMINO CINCPAC to Adm Sharp, 190421Z Oct 65, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CS–448, 210500Z Oct 65, DIA to AIG 925, 041738Z Nov 65; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Oct 14 and Oct 28, 1965.

50. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 6232d CSG, 101000Z Nov 65. This message was to be passed to DEPCOMUSMACHAI's TACC.

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stronghold. Pilots and ground observers reported good results and accurate bombing in the face of heavy 37-mm and automatic weapons fire. Two more days of air strikes were requested.[51]

General Westmoreland did not like this helter-skelter approach to scheduling. Whenever more than eight sorties a day were needed to support RLG ground forces, he wanted the request sent two days in advance. The request should give the desired times over target, forward air controller rendezvous coordinates, and the types of targets to be hit. Where conditions precluded two days advance notice, requests should coincide with the ordnance loaded on Bango/Whiplash. Westmoreland further asserted that giving the Laotians so many USAF sorties would render them overly dependent on such support in the future. Finally, he reminded the embassy that interdiction in Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger had first call on air assets, including Bango/Whiplash. Nevertheless, he furnished the requested sorties.[52]

Sing's troops assaulted Phou Kout on November 16, using Kong Le's old plan of going up the mountain's northern slope, but were driven back by the deeply entrenched enemy. Undaunted, Sing planned another try on the twentieth and Pettigrew asked for thirty-six sorties covering November 19 and 20. While the air attaché's request was two days in advance as Westmoreland wanted, it was not honored because it ate into the interdiction commitment. The best that could be done was to allocate four Bango/Whiplash aircraft that could be turned around to supply eight sorties. MACV also instructed the 2d Air Division and TG 77.0 to make all sorties in excess of interdiction needs available.[53]

MACV's stand posed a basic policy question: When are sorties earmarked for interdiction to be diverted to close air support? Granted, Pettigrew had sought an average of twenty or more sorties each day for the last five days, but they had been urgently needed. The neutralists were attempting to retake Phou Kout, and a communist thrust threatened Thakhek[54] as well as friendly positions along the Kum Kam River south of Route 9. Considering the circumstances, Sullivan thought all available aircraft should have been sent to help out.[55]

General Westmoreland's orders from Secretary McNamara were somewhat in opposition to Sullivan's thinking. In July, McNamara became concerned over what he saw as too much Air Force and Navy planning for Rolling Thunder. Contending that the war would be won or lost in South Vietnam, he wanted first priority given to supporting ground operations there. Not one bomb was to be dropped in North Vietnam or Laos if the sortie would be better used in the south, clearly defining the main theater of operations.[56] The secondary theater—almost equally important—was the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Without it, the communists could not keep the war in the south going. Barrel Roll (interdiction and close air support in Laos) and Rolling Thunder (strikes in North Vietnam) came last. Ambassador Sullivan was aware of the administration's policy. He emphatically agreed that South Vietnam was the main theater; but he was more aware than anyone else, perhaps, of one major factor underlining all U.S. actions along the trail. Souvanna had given his blessing for these air strikes on two conditions: the United States would refuse to publicly admit the strikes were going on and would supply needed air power beyond

51. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DA, CX–474, 131015Z Nov 65; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Nov 11, 1965.

52. Msg, COMUSMACV to AIRA Vientiane, 140742Z Nov 65.

53. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 161100Z Nov 65, 171240Z Nov 65, COMUSMACV to AIRA Vientiane, 171745Z Nov 65.

54. Souvanna thought that the enemy was intent on rice gathering at Thakhek and would soon retreat back into the hills; but if the push continued, the prime minister intended asking for more U.S. air strikes, including the use of napalm. [Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 488, Nov 14, 1965.]

55. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 506, Nov 18, 1965.

56. It is not clear if McNamara meant all U.S. aircraft in Southeast Asia or just those in South Vietnam. If he meant all, he was in error, since Thailand-based planes were forbidden to hit targets in South Vietnam.

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the RLAF's capability. Sullivan believed that the prime minister's requests had been within reason. If General Westmoreland continued to refuse air for such operations as Phou Kout, Souvanna might well sour on the Americans and shut off further strikes in the panhandle. It was better to share a little air power and show good faith than to withhold it because the operation was not militarily feasible or did not promise lavish bomb damage assessment.[57]

(S) Smack in the middle of the sortie discussion, Souvanna asked that U.S. jets hit RLAF Target 253, an armored vehicle park on the outskirts of Khangkhai. This attack on the former neutralist capital was in reprisal to the communist thrust toward Thakhek that threatened to cut the country in half. The 2d Air Division was called on to fly a "maximum feasible effort" for November 20—the day the neutralists planned to go up the side of Phou Kout mountain. This time General Westmoreland delivered—he ordered sixteen F–105s diverted from Steel Tiger to the Plain of Jars to fly the Khangkhai strike. Due to bad weather, however, just eight Thunderchiefs flew the strike. The next day, Radio Peking announced that four U.S. planes "wantonly" attacked Khangkhai with rockets and 20-mm cannon fire. All air operations in Barrel Roll were temporarily suspended pending bomb damage assessment photographs. Unseasonably poor weather gripped the area, and a Yankee Team RF–101 could not take pictures until November 24. The photos disclosed six buildings in the cantonment area and eight small structures adjacent to the northern end of the target destroyed. Several bombs had fallen outside the vehicle park, but none had landed inside the town or on the ICC helicopter pad as Peking claimed. Through it all, Souvanna stayed calm. If asked by the press to answer Chinese charges, he intended to steadfastly hold to "no comment" and wanted Washington to do the same.[58]

(S) The 2d Air Division could not reschedule sorties for Phou Kout until December 2. This time, sixteen F–105s hit the mountain and repeated the strikes the next two days. Bango/Whiplash planes strafed enemy reinforcements moving westward along Route 7. However, Colonel Sing's troops would not move out; and on December 5, Souvanna went to Muong Soui to build a fire under them. Instead, he came away asking Swank for another three days of concentrated F–105 strikes (sixteen each day). The Navy shared this workload with the Air Force, though bad weather prevented all but a few sorties from reaching the mountain. The D–day of December 9 was now pushed back to December 21 or 22. Colonel Pettigrew once more requested sixteen sorties a day for three days, starting on December 19.[59]

(S) Meanwhile, along Route 6 to the north of Phou Kout, three North Vietnamese Army battalions began tightening the cordon around Hua Muong (Lima Site 58), and all plans for pounding Phou Kout were shelved. On December 21 (the start of the three-day Meo New Year), Vang Pao's hard-pressed troops evaporated northward, marking the third time in 1965 that Lima Site 58 had changed hands. Na Khang (Lima Site 36) next came under pressure, and twenty sorties a day were reserved for its defense.[60]

(S) At this juncture, President Johnson entered the picture. On December 7, Viet Cong radio had proposed a truce for South Vietnam so South Vietnamese and U.S. soldiers could attend Christmas Eve church services and celebrate the holiday. On December 23, the President accepted; and under an agreement Ambassador Lodge worked out with the Saigon government, allied ground operations would cease and all aircraft in South Vietnam and Thailand would stand

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57. (S) MR, MACV, subj: Record of Questions and Answers in Meeting between Secretary McNamara and His Party, Ambassador Taylor and His Staff, and COMUSMACV and His Staff, Jul 16, 1965.

58. (S) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 171115Z Nov 65, COMUSMACV to 2d AD, 190607Z Nov 65, NMCC to CINCPAC, 202007Z Nov 65, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 531, Nov 22, 1965, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 312, Nov 23, 1965, PACAF to CINCPAC, 241334Z Nov 65, 242033Z Nov 65.

59. (S) Msg, JCS to Dir/NSA, 021218Z Dec 65, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 061310Z Dec 65, 151307Z Dec 65, COMUSMACV to 2d AD, CTG 77.0, 070450Z Dec 65.

60. (S) Msg, DIA to AIG 7011, 280425Z Dec 65; *Effect of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Dec 23, 1965.

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down. This also wiped out all air strikes in North Vietnam and Laos. Seeing no reason for this, Sullivan asked that the orders from the "highest level" be rescinded where Laos was concerned. Lima Site 58 had fallen, and Lima Site 36 might well be next. Tha Thom (Lima Site 11) was also coming under sporadic artillery and mortar fire. Souvanna had asked for help, and with Rolling Thunder canceled for thirty hours, plenty of air power was available. Sullivan asserted a Christmas bombing truce might spell disaster for the Royal Laotian Government.[61]

Sullivan's pleas did not fall on deaf ears, but the results were about the same. The JCS notified CINCPAC on December 24 that air operations would stop, except for Bango/Whiplash, which would be used to meet Vientiane's needs. Nevertheless, Pettigrew at once requested forty sorties for Phou Kout and Na Khang on Christmas Day. Both areas would have ground FAGs or airborne FACs in O–1s, C–47s, or T–28s to direct the strikes. To ease identification, all targets would be marked with smoke.[62]

Why Colonel Pettigrew asked for forty sorties when just four Bango/Whiplash aircraft were on alert is puzzling. The best these planes could do was to make one, possibly two turnarounds, a maximum of twelve sorties. Perhaps, with Sullivan's cables and Rolling Thunder stopped, the air attaché may have thought more than the usual four aircraft would be put on alert. However, Sullivan's personal message to Admiral Sharp on Christmas Day complains that embassy personnel were told that CINCPAC had limited them to only eight sorties. Obviously, these were the four Bango/Whiplash jets rearmed and refueled just one time. Sharp sent a message three hours later directing MACV and PACFLT to furnish the forty sorties, but the only U.S. strikes in Laos during the truce were two alert missions from Thailand.[63] At first glance, it seems the field purposely failed to follow CINCPAC's instructions. There is an explanation, however. Crews relieved from duty beginning December 24 did not wait around the barracks hoping to fly on Christmas Day. They went to a movie, downtown, or to Bangkok for the holidays—as aircrews were wont to do whenever given time off from the drudgery of wartime flying.

Although full-scale fighting and air strikes resumed in South Vietnam on December 26, President Johnson was under domestic and foreign pressure to extend the bombing halt over North Vietnam. It was argued that the North Vietnamese would never agree to negotiate while their country was under air attack. Continuing the bombing halt was an enticement to lure Hanoi to the conference table, and Johnson felt it was worth a try. His decision had an instant impact on Laos. On December 29, Defense Secretary McNamara told the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he wanted a net increase there equal to the number of sorties that usually flew north. However, in line with the President's directive, no aircraft from carriers were to fly over North Vietnam, effectively limiting the Navy to missions in Steel Tiger.[64]

Sullivan saw no better place for these extra missions than Phou Kout and Na Khang, but when enemy action in these areas suddenly slacked off, most of the 200–300 daily sorties went to Steel Tiger and to Tiger Hound, a special interdiction campaign. Concentrated in Laotian territory contiguous to South Vietnam (the southern end of the panhandle), Tiger Hound relied chiefly on aircraft based in South Vietnam and used USAF FACs with Laotian observers to control air strikes. From December 24, 1965, through January 6, 1966, Barrel Roll received 614

61. *New York Times*, Dec 23, 1965; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 678, Dec 23, 1965.

62. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 9230, 231423Z Dec 65, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, CINCPACFLT, CINCPACAF, 231736Z Dec 65, COMUSMACV to 2d AD, 240030Z Dec 65, AIRA Vientiane to CTF 77 and All TG Comdrs of CTF 77, 2d AD, *et al*, 240810Z Dec 65.

63. Msgs, AIRA (Amb Sullivan) to CINCPAC, 250305Z Dec 65, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, CINCPACFLT, 250650Z Dec 65, JCS to Dir/NSA, 271142Z Dec 65.

64. *New York Times*, Dec 27, 1965; *Washington Post*, Dec 27, 1965; msgs, NMCC (Adm Mustin) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 292342Z Dec 65, CINCPAC (Adm Sharp) to NMCC (Adm Mustin), 300930Z Dec 65.

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sorties (560 Air Force, 54 Navy), compared with 1,487 sorties for Steel Tiger (700 Air Force, 787 Navy) and 399 sorties for Tiger Hound (309 Air Force, 90 Marine Corps).[65]

The western Plain of Jars was stable for the next two weeks. The neutralists during the respite sacked Colonel Sing and came up with a new plan for Phou Kout. Since they had lost all previous "king of the mountain" tussles with the North Vietnamese, the neutralists decided to forego any more assaults. Instead, massive doses of American bombing would reduce the mountain top to rubble (it already resembled a no-man's land), and it would be bypassed. With their rear thus secured, the Laotians would strike out at several other communist positions. The objective was to form a north-south perimeter arcing through the Pen River, about ten miles east of Muong Soui. The operation's starting date was not firm since it called for eight battalions. The Americans thought the plan held little promise; it was hard to coordinate and, as before, the neutralists lacked the "fighting spirit and will to win."[66]

The eight neutralist battalions were in place on January 25, 1966, and the 30th was tentatively selected as the starting date. Pettigrew now asked that USAF close air support sorties be jumped from twenty-four to thirty-six per day. On February 1, however, President Johnson ended the thirty-seven-day bombing halt; and the planes that might have been used at Phou Kout were sent back north. From January 28 to February 3, the neutralists received mostly T–28 support from Wattay. U.S. jets flew only forty-four close support sorties, twenty-four in the Plain of Jars and twenty at Lima Site 36. Although most of the Rolling Thunder weather aborts were diverted to Barrel Roll, they hit road segments, despite roadwatch team reports that the cuts were being bypassed by the North Vietnamese. The neutralist push sputtered, then died. Only the 2d Paratroop Battalion—Kong Le's old outfit—gained any ground. Even so, another assault was set for February 20.[67]

The communists, after a month's layoff (coincident with the bombing halt), resumed their try to gain control of Route 6. During the night of February 12, they easily overran Houei Thom (Lima Site 27); five days later they attacked Lima Site 36. In the days that followed, Lima Site 36 was lost, napalm was first used on enemy troops in Laos, and the air attacks were so devastating that the enemy was scarcely able to occupy the captured ground.

The battle for Site 36 began around midnight on February 16 with the loss of an outpost a mile south of Na Khang. Following this, the communists, camouflaged with rice sacks, crept to within eight hundred yards of the airstrip and poured mortar fire on it in the early morning hours. The troops at the strip answered with 105-mm and 75-mm howitzers and the initial thrust was thrown back. As the enemy regrouped in the murky darkness, an AC–47 Spooky gunship appeared overhead in response to the site's distress call, the first time the C–47 transport conversion appeared in Laos. The Spooky mounted three 7.62-mm miniguns on its port side that were fired electrically by the pilot. The ship carried 16,500 rounds for each gun, which fired 6,000 rounds per minute. The plane also carried forty-eight Mk–24 flares of two million candlepower each. In spite of poor air-ground communications with the site, the AC–47 dropped flares and spewed out its fire. The startled enemy broke and ran. By dawn, only a single FAR outpost had fallen.[68]

On the morning of February 17, during a lull in the fighting, the site's USAF forward air controller took off and flew east to control air strikes at Lima Site 27. He returned to find that

65. *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Jan 6, 1966; msg, AIRA Vientiane to JCS, 103, 180430Z Jan 66; msg, CINCPAC to DIA, 150332Z Mar 66.
66. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 41, 240950Z Jan 66.
67. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 251216Z Jan 66, JANAF Attachés Vientiane to DIA, 102, 190550Z Feb 66, AIRA Vientiane to JCS, 485, 120919Z Mar 66.
68. Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 109, 211125Z Feb 66, AIRA Vientiane to JCS, 485, 120919Z Mar 66; Anthony, p 28.

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radio contact had been lost with the ground and the airstrip again under mortar attack. The defenders managed to mark the communist positions with smoke shells, and the FAC directed jet strikes near the runway. He then had his Air America pilot land their Pilatus Porter plane on the shell-pocked airstrip. After racing to a nearby trench, the forward air controller started acting as a forward air guide, while a [redacted] pilot in a T–28 stayed aloft as a FAC. Both men spent the rest of the day directing T–28 and Bango/Whiplash strikes. The communists were beaten back and the camp remained in friendly hands during the night.[69] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S) CIA

Vang Pao had won the first two rounds, but he was not overly anxious to fight for Lima Site 36 for more than a few days since standup battles ran counter to his basic guerrilla philosophy. Still, he knew that if Site 36 fell, Lima Site 48 would be next and, with it, control of Route 6. The CAS commander at Site 36 remembered Ambassador Sullivan's canon that napalm could be used only to prevent the loss of a major friendly position. This site certainly fit that category, and the North Vietnamese attackers were conveniently massed in the nearby woods. He believed there was little chance of hitting the defenders, especially when the strikes were being pinpointed by experienced forward air controllers, and asked the embassy for USAF jets loaded with napalm to bomb the enemy and, hopefully, save the site.[70]

The North Vietnamese attacked the runway at dawn on February 18. They got within twenty-five yards of the strip before being repulsed by AC–47 and F–105 strikes. The Meo then swept the strip area and expanded their perimeters. Helicopter operations resumed, and Vang Pao landed to take personal charge of the defense. The North Vietnamese, who had been reinforced, made another charge at the strip. A ricocheting bullet wounded Vang Pao in the chest and upper arm, and the Meo general was swiftly evacuated by helicopter to Korat.[71]

The enemy troops were apparently determined to seize the site at all costs, and Sullivan decided it was time to use napalm. That afternoon, four F–105s from the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing at Takhli dropped sixteen BLU–1B napalm cans on the communists in the trees two hundred yards southwest of the airstrip.[72] The North Vietnamese kept coming, however, and Site 36 was soon nearly surrounded. The POL storage area and some buildings, including the hospital, were on fire. The friendly troops began to be evacuated, although the forward air controller continued to call in USAF jets almost to the end.[73]

The last Meo was airlifted out of Lima Site 36 on February 19. Afterwards, Whiplash F–105s dispensed napalm, destroying the war materiél left behind. While air power had failed to save the site, it had exacted a high cost from the enemy. During the three-day battle, F–105s and F–4s flew 165 close support sorties and the Spooky gunship provided night support; during a lull in the battle, the forward air controller counted seventy enemy dead in a rice paddy close to the area of the first napalm strike. Refugees later passing through Na Khang told of dead North Vietnamese strewn about like tree stumps, estimating more than one thousand casualties. Another

69. Intvw, Proj CHECO hist, with Capt Ramon A. Horinek [unit unknown], Feb 20–21, 1966. Horinek was the FAC at Lima Site 36 (Feb 17–19, 1966).

70. Capt Melvin F. Porter, *The Defense of Lima Site 36* (Proj CHECO), Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1966), pp 2–3.

71. Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 109, 211125Z Feb 66, AmEmb Vientiane to AmEmb Bangkok, SECSTATE, 903, Feb 18, 1966.

72. This was not the first napalm drop in Laos. On October 5, 1965, a Navy A–4E loaded for a Rolling Thunder mission with rockets and napalm was launched to look for a downed aircraft flying a Barrel Roll mission close to North Vietnam. Due to ground fog, the A–4 pilot could not locate any of his assigned secondary targets within North Vietnam and wandered back across the border into Laos south of Route 7. He ran low on fuel and decided to drop his ordnance on a clear section of road about ten miles west of the border. The A–4 returned to the carrier, landing with only six hundred pounds of fuel remaining. TG 77.5 pilots were again reminded they were not to drop napalm in Laos under any circumstances. [Msg, CTG 77.5 to AIG 913, 051218Z Oct 65.]

73. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 900, Feb 18, 1966, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 180235Z Feb 66; Porter, pp 8–9.

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refugee said an enemy column carrying dead and wounded to the rear took nearly six hours to pass his position [redacted]t Vientiane played down most of the refugee reports but conceded that between two and three hundred North Vietnamese died in the fight. The enemy ranks were so depleted that nearly a week went by before the site was occupied. Since Sullivan anticipated a Royal Laotian Government action to retake the lost ground during the upcoming wet season, it seemed the North Vietnamese had scored a Pyrrhic victory.[74]

(b)(1) (b)(3)

(S) The concerns now were that the losses of Lima Sites 27 and 36 portended a fresh North Vietnamese offensive in northern Laos. If Site 48 were next and it fell, the communists had Route 6 secure. The next target then could well be the neutralists on the western fringe of the Plain of Jars. Sullivan did not have the answers, but he felt the loss of the lima sites was in reprisal to the "loudly heralded but rather feebly executed attack on Phou Kout." For two years, the neutralists had been trying to take this mountain without success. This latest try may have been the last straw for the North Vietnamese Army, and the push on Vang Pao's outposts was probably the direct result of neutralist moves on the Plain of Jars. Nevertheless, the ambassador did not think the enemy would concentrate anywhere in Laos because of U.S. air power; the old "nibbling strategy" would continue. The Soviet ambassador, Boris Y. Kimasovsky, later told Sullivan he had talked with "these people" and it was his opinion there would be no major NVA offensive. Sullivan did not know if this was Hanoi's signal that its objectives in Laos were limited, but he believed Kimasovsky actually had little insight into Hanoi's purpose.[75] However, within three weeks, the North Vietnamese would show what they had up their sleeve.

(S) At this point, the neutralists temporarily called off their February 20 Phou Kout assault since the USAF sorties for softening the bunkers and entrenchments had been diverted to Na Khang's defense. Then, after discussing it with Souvanna, Kong Le decided to take up defensive positions. Calm enveloped Muong Soui until March 4 when the communists suddenly lobbed in fifteen mortar rounds, killing two civilians. Two days later, they attacked and retook the northern anchor of Kong Le's line. During another probe, a captured NVA soldier divulged plans for an assault on Muong Soui inside of four days. The loss of the town would spell disaster for the Royal Laotian Government. It was the last government position on the Plain of Jars and the gateway to Sala Phou Koun. It was also the operating base of the [redacted]artillery battery, and Ambassador Sullivan was determined to use napalm if the communists attacked. Until the enemy did, none of the sixteen sorties a day Pettigrew had asked for would carry napalm.[76]

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(S) Normally, Souvanna Phouma would have agreed with Sullivan, but the situation at Muong Soui was critical. After consulting with his military commanders, the prime minister concluded that Phou Kout's capture would save Muong Soui. He requested that U.S. jets armed with napalm clear out the deeply entrenched enemy so his troops could take the mountain. A review of Colonel Sing's plan (he had been restored to Souvanna's good graces) convinced the country team it could well succeed if about thirty planes, most loaded with napalm, preceded the assault.[77]

(S) Under FAC direction, the air bombardment was unleashed on March 14. Their morale lifted by sight and sound of the exploding ordnance, the Laotian soldiers scrambled up the east slope and most of "Old Baldy" was soon in their hands. This time, the napalm strikes had "neutralized the spirits" that lived on the mountain. The enemy clung tenaciously to the north

74. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, 061215Z Mar 66; Porter, p 10.
75. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Sullivan) to AmEmb Manila (Harriman), SECSTATE, 905, Feb 20, 1966, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 916, Feb 24, 1966.
76. (S) Msgs, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCUSARPAC, 210100Z Feb 66, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 108, 211040Z Feb 66, 128, 040850Z Mar 66, AIRA Vientiane to Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, 061217Z Mar 66, JCS to Dir/NSA, 091010Z Mar 66.
77. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 978, Mar 11, 1966, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 101450Z Mar 66, retransmitted COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 110845Z Mar 66, JCS to Dir/NSA, 121050Z Mar 66.

slope and, from Hill 1157 to the east, poured in heavy fire. Obviously, the North Vietnamese Army was not going to cave in easily, having fought hard to clear out government positions over the previous six weeks. Moreover, the capture of Phou Kout threatened the communist grip on the Plain of Jars. Colonel Pettigrew now called for eight sorties per day (all FAC-directed) to saturate the bunkers at the summit and side of Hill 1157. Sixteen more sorties would be needed at Lima Site 48, which had suddenly fallen to the communists on the night of March 12/13.[78]

(S) In spite of the napalm attacks, the enemy held Hill 1157. On the night of March 17/18, a volunteer neutralist demolition team attempted to infiltrate the area and blow up the bunkers. The group was discovered before it could set the charges; five of the soldiers were killed and four wounded. Since the start of the assault, Laotian casualties stood at ten dead, thirty-one wounded. Though unknown at the time, the high-water mark of the Royal Laotian Government offensive had been attained.[79]

(S) At four in the morning on March 20, elements of the Pathet Lao 2d and 701st Battalions swept the neutralists off Phou Kout. They also captured Phou Douk to the south, tightened their control around Phou Song, and began a random shelling of Muong Soui. Even though Sing's troops outgunned and outnumbered the communists and held better terrain, Sullivan reported they now had "a severe case of the galloping blue funk" that was spreading to all the units at Muong Soui, including the [redacted] battery. The ambassador feared that the neutralists, with their loser's complex, would "simply fold up and run" at the first sign of an enemy attack. Most exasperating was the attitude of the FAR General Staff. In typical Laotian fashion, it focused on two separate and irrelevant events—the March 23 Armed Forces Day parade and the March 28 visit to Vientiane by Thanom Kittikachorn, Thai Prime Minister. On top of this, several FAR officers displayed a private glee at the plight of the neutralists at Muong Soui.[80]

(b) (1) EO 1.4 (c) (d)

(S) Sullivan was bent on doing all he could to get the Laotians "to pull their socks up and make a determined stand." Failing this, the country team would start "kicking as many tails as we can" and lay on heavy air strikes in the plain and around Muong Soui. As a first step, Pettigrew asked the 2d Air Division to hit RLAF Target 217, the Ban Liang military complex near Khangkhai. After this strike, he wanted 18 sorties daily for Barrel Roll interdiction and 24 sorties for close support. He further requested a Cricket forward air controller[81] and an AC–47[82] to fly night armed reconnaissance along Route 7, but the 2d Division could furnish just four sorties for RLAF Target 217. Terming it "folly" to send so few planes after such a heavily defended site, Sullivan canceled the mission. He dispatched a message to Admiral Sharp asking him to "gently and discreetly prod our friends in Saigon to give us the aircraft we will need for

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78. (S) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 150330Z Mar 66, JCS to Dir/NSA, 161108Z Mar 66; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Mar 4–17, 1966. There had been no contact with the defenders at Site 48 since March 12, so information on the situation there was scanty. It was later determined that a battalion-size NVA force had bypassed the major defenses around Muong Heim and infiltrated to within fifty yards of the main base. All friendly positions were struck simultaneously, and the neutralists were routed with heavy casualties. [Msgs, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCUSARPAC, 180825Z Mar 66, ARMA/AIRA Laos to DIA, [redacted] et al, 171, 190620Z Mar 66.]

(b)(1) EO 1.4(c)

79. (S) Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, CIA, *et al*, 171, 190620Z Mar 66.

80. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1006, Mar 21, 1966, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 187, 260604Z Mar 66.

81. (S) Cricket FACs were Thailand-based, U.S. pilots in O–1 aircraft with Laotian observers in the backseats. They received target information from roadwatch teams and identified targets by flying at tree level. When targets were validated, fighters were diverted from alert or from armed reconnaissance/strike missions. During seven days in January, seventy-one trucks were spotted this way in Steel Tiger with forty-five destroyed. O–1 pilots also performed good bomb damage assessment since they flew lower and slower than jets. [Msg, CINCPAC to DIA, 150332Z Mar 66.]

82. (S) When he asked for the AC–47, Pettigrew suggested its mission terminate in the Plain of Jars from the northeast. This way, the North Vietnamese would think it was one of their aerial resupply transports that were active once more. [Msg, USAIRA Vientiane to Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, 100430Z Mar 66.]

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this effort." The next day, F–105s and other aircraft flew 70 sorties against RLAF Target 217, demolishing over twenty-five buildings. By March 25, U.S. jets had flown 195 close support sorties in the Muong Soui area.[83]

The situation at Muong Soui was critical. The neutralists were demoralized, and the FAR general staff showed little inclination to assist. Many were reminded of similar events a few years earlier, following the loss of the northern provinces to the Pathet Lao, when Phoumi Nosavan had hoped the United States would bring in its ground forces and "save" Laos. In truth, Souvanna Phouma believed that Hanoi's current offensive was designed to force Washington to do now what it would not do in 1959 or 1961. Ambassador Sullivan did not think so—if the communists really wanted the United States in Laos, they would take a direct action like seizing Thakhek or another town on the Mekong River. On the contrary, Sullivan thought the North Vietnamese wanted to keep American GIs out of Laos to preserve their relative free hand and would limit their actions to what was acceptable under the unwritten ground rules—the annual exchange of real estate in the northeast.[84] The North Vietnamese had undeniably diverted far more supplies, trucks, and troops for military operations in northern Laos than ever before. The reason for this North Vietnamese buildup was unclear, but Ambassador Sullivan believed the Pathet Lao had put heavy pressure on Hanoi to sustain its military and political posture with the Royal Laotian Government. Neo Lao Hak Xat, the Pathet Lao's political party, needed several strong shots in the arm; and Ho Chi Minh could hardly afford any further weakening of a movement that had been so helpful in his attempt to achieve a united Vietnam. More important, the North Vietnamese Army wanted to drive home the point that they, not Souvanna Phouma or the United States, called the shots in northern Laos. The growth of FAR and Meo strength, Vang Pao's capture of Lima Site 58, and the stepped-up American air effort particularly (limited though it was) were likely seen by Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap as efforts to dislodge the North Vietnamese Army from key positions in northern Laos. Obviously, Giap thought it was time to teach Souvanna and the FAR "a hard lesson."[85]

One point was now quite clear to Sullivan. In a way, it did not matter if the NVA chose to knife deeper into Laos or not. They had amply demonstrated they could carry out an impressive logistic/offensive operation in the teeth of air and guerrilla harassment and in a theater with no direct bearing on their military effort in South Vietnam. So far, air strikes in northern Laos had been merely harassment, but the heavy and frequent attacks on such targets as Ban Liang and the intensified armed reconnaissance and interdiction in Barrel Roll threatened to make it more costly and difficult for Hanoi in the future.[86]

However, other important matters clamored for immediate attention. The morale of the neutralists continued to plummet, and troops of Independent Battalion 8 abandoned their positions near Phou Kout on March 30, 1966. The men walked back from their lines to the airstrip of Lima Site 108 (Muong Soui), demanding they be returned to Vang Vieng. Kong Le refused to intervene; and after several futile discussions with the mutineers, Colonel Sing called for aircraft to evacuate them. Before sending Air America, Sullivan consulted with Souvanna, who suggested he comply with the request. The episode led the ambassador to say: "We've got a lot more sow's ears than we have silk purses in this lot. I'm afraid we can't promise much in a most unpromising predicament."[87]

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83. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1006, Mar 21, 1966, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 200510Z Mar 66, AIRA Vientiane to 2d AD, 200400Z Mar 66, Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, 100430Z Mar 66, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 3499, Mar 25, 1966, 2d AD to CINCPAC, 251009Z Mar 66, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 187, 260604Z Mar 66.
84. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1015, Mar 23, 1966.
85. *Ibid.*
86. *Ibid.*
87. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1039, Mar 31, 1966.

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[redacted]

Sullivan, Pettigrew, and other country team members met with the FAR General Staff and Souvanna on April 2. At the meeting, Maj. Gen. Ouane Rathikone lamented the performance of the neutralists and petitioned Souvanna to press Kong Le to reinforce Muong Soui. Ouane also asked Sullivan for more air strikes on enemy supply buildups in the Plain of Jars and for assurances of close air support "with the most effective weapons available" if and when the NVA assault came. Next, Ouane and Maj. Gen. Kouprasith Abhay voiced dissatisfaction with the Barrel Roll interdiction campaign. Why is it, they asked, that so many U.S. jets were being used in the panhandle when the real fight was in the Plain of Jars? Sullivan promised more interdiction sorties and to help defend Muong Soui with as many aircraft as he could get his hands on.[88]

CAS and USAF photo-analysts at Udorn pinpointed over a hundred lucrative targets in northern Laos. A systematic analysis of Routes 6, 65, and 7 further uncovered large enemy caches and storage complexes. Pettigrew proposed that the Seventh Air Force (formerly 2d Air Division)[89] conduct heavy interdiction of as many RLAF-validated targets as possible over a two-week period. Paralleling this operation would be a methodical interdiction of Barrel Roll lines of communication where heavy road traffic had been seen. This would alleviate pressure on Muong Soui and compel the enemy to divert some logistic flow from South Vietnam. Pettigrew wanted at least eighty interdiction sorties a day, to convince Ouane and others that the United States intended to support RLG forces, its own forces, and those of South Vietnam.[90]

Many factors worked against the eighty sorties a day the air attaché wanted. First, there were not enough aircraft available in the theater to take care of the major air campaigns. For example, the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing at Ubon could not meet the sortie load imposed on it. Its "Wolfpack" worked North Vietnam, Steel Tiger, and Barrel Roll and stood Bango alert. Admiral Sharp had sent a priority request to the JCS for deployment to Thailand of three additional fighter squadrons, but Thai bases could not handle many more U.S. planes without beefing up the facilities. [redacted][91]

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Moreover, for the past three months, high-explosive bombs had been in short supply, particularly five-hundred-pound bombs. During February and March, Sullivan had needed five thousand of these iron bombs for the RLAF and Firefly pilots. Since he received merely twenty-eight hundred he had to resort to rationing. The shortage continued; and in early March, Admiral Sharp set a limit of three thousand U.S. sorties in Laos. He did agree not to count weather diverts and Rolling Thunder aborts against this ceiling. Even so, when Pettigrew asked for eighty sorties a day, it was evident the extra missions would have to come out of some other area's allocation.[92]

On top of this, Sullivan and Westmoreland were still at odds over the importance of northern Laos to the Southeast Asia theater. The ambassador earlier fretted that he had not received

88. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1051, Apr 3, 1966.
89. During the COMUSMACTHAI/COMUSMACV discussions, Westmoreland had suggested that a numbered air force replace 2d Air Division. In March 1966, due to the current scope of USAF activities and planned additional force deployments, McConnell acted. Effective on April 1, this reorganization did not alter any existing relationships. At the same time, Headquarters 2d Air Division/Thirteenth Air Force at Udorn became Headquarters Seventh/Thirteenth Air Force, or Hq 7th/13th for short. [Msg, CSAF to CINCPAC, 171547Z Mar 66.]
90. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 061035Z Apr 66.
91. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 020346Z Apr 66.
92. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 859, Feb 5, 1966, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), SECSTATE, 838, Feb 1, 1966, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 021055Z Mar 66, ADMINO CINCPAC to Adm Sharp 030630Z Mar 66.

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sufficient close air support. In March, he was irked because his interdiction needs could not be systematically met. After talking with Brig. Gen. George B. Simler, 2d Air Division Operations Chief, and Brig. Gen. Rockly Triantafellu, 2d Air Division Intelligence Chief, Sullivan had hoped to get more interdiction sorties during March. All he secured, however, were thirteen armed reconnaissance sorties scheduled for Routes 6 and 7. (Sullivan admitted his records did not show how many were flown.) The net result was an unimpeded enemy buildup on the Plain of Jars "with all the repercussions that implies." Sullivan reemphasized the quid pro quo relationship between northern Laos and the Air Force's interdiction of the trail. He also remarked to Westmoreland that Colonel Pettigrew and General Bond had pleaded regularly for more Barrel Roll sorties to no avail. The ambassador claimed he was "fast reaching the end of the rope on this matter."[93]

(S) Sullivan added that he had two choices to emphasize his exasperation, neither of them palatable. He could put the entire problem on Washington's doorstep and ask for adequate measures to satisfy RLG needs ("that way lies bloodshed and heartburn"). Conversely, he could exercise his authority and suspend Steel Tiger until he received better allocations for Barrel Roll (instantly vetoed as being "irresponsible and contrary to the national interests"). Sullivan wanted to iron out this problem "in the family" without having to go higher and asked Westmoreland to impress on his staff the need to pay some attention to the air effort in northern Laos. The ambassador did not think the requests for eighty sorties were out of line, since Barrel Roll was but a small fraction of Seventh Air Force's daily schedule. In addition, he suggested that General Moore regularly send a team to Vientiane or Udorn to program targets and make Barrel Roll more productive. Otherwise, U.S. neglect might impel the Royal Laotian Government to ask the Air Force to stop bombing the panhandle.[94]

(S) Whether Souvanna Phouma would have told the United States to end attacks on the trail is debatable, but Sullivan had made his point. Westmoreland agreed that Barrel Roll deserved more attention. Weather permitting, Sullivan could expect more sorties within forty-eight hours. In the interim, General Moore would send staff members to Udorn to confer with General Bond and embassy representatives. After this planning meeting, Seventh Air Force personnel would meet regularly with the country team at Vientiane or Udorn.[95]

(S) General Westmoreland next informed Admiral Sharp he had furnished Sullivan 612 sorties in March, but the ambassador claimed he needed more. Sullivan was quick to stress that the 612 sorties were, in fact, diverts from Rolling Thunder that dropped ordnance on road segments, not support for troops-in-contact. One way COMUSMACV thought he could help was to draw from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and General Moore discussed this with Lt. Gen. Lewis W. Walt, USMC, III Marine Amphibious Force Commander. Westmoreland was confident the Marines would not let him down. Even so, he reminded Admiral Sharp that South Vietnam and the adjacent areas of Steel Tiger, Tiger Hound, and Route Package I in North Vietnam[96] still held higher priority.[97]

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93. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland), 020630Z Apr 66.
94. (S) *Ibid*; msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland), 061140Z Apr 66.
95. (S) Msg, COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland) to AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan), retransmitted as 7th AF to CINCPACAF 081144Z Apr 66.
96. (S) To maintain the independence of Navy air power, CINCPAC had unilaterally divided North Vietnam into six geographical armed reconnaissance "route packages." On December 10, 1965, he assigned PACAF Route Packages II, IV, and V, while PACFLT was to cover I and III. In poor weather, each service could fly into the other's primary operating area if they gave prior notice and the service concerned concurred. Route Package VI (northeastern North Vietnam) was subdivided into VIA (USAF) and VIB (USN). In the ensuing weeks, the Navy more and more conducted its missions in the coastal areas, a practice that left the bombing of most of the inland and more strongly defended targets to the Air Force. [Rprt, JCS Rolling Thunder Study Gp, Air Operations Against North Vietnam, Apr 6, 1966.]
97. (S) Msgs COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 080825Z Apr 66; AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 061140Z Apr 66.

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[redacted]

Meanwhile, CINCPAC's staff had tabulated the sorties flown in Laos and Route Package I during March and April 1–7, 1966. Barrel Roll had received 1,420 of 5,111 sorties in March but only 63 of 1,872 during the first seven days of April. Admiral Sharp informed General Westmoreland that, from these figures, 28 percent of the March effort in Laos went to Barrel Roll, but less than 4 percent thus far in April. While agreeing the priority should stay in Steel Tiger and Route Package I, Sharp said the current ratio seemed "disproportionate."[98] Further, at the present rate of 275 sorties a day in the panhandle areas, it was possible that ordnance in short supply was being wasted. Sharp suggested that flights of two aircraft could garner the same results in Steel Tiger and Route Package I as flights of four or more. Finally, Sharp wanted Westmoreland to reexamine targeting procedures and, wherever possible, call in ground alert aircraft "when a 'catch' is bigger than the scheduled effort can handle." Thus, Sharp saw no reason to use the Marine fighters.[99]

During this exchange of views, Muong Soui remained quiet. The North Vietnamese made no moves past Phou Kout, and some were spotted withdrawing from the vicinity of Lima Sites 48 and 36. A large number of trucks still used Route 7; and although this might portend a renewed offensive, it was more likely the communists were building up their supply caches for the upcoming wet season. On April 4, the FAR General Staff, Kong Le, and acting defense minister Sisoumang Sisaleumsak (Souvanna Phouma had left for Tokyo and Moscow) set up a joint command for Muong Soui's defense. The neutralists would protect the defensive line's center, the Meo would cover the flanks, and FAR GM 2 would be in reserve. A similar arrangement at Muong Hiem had proved worthless; and the Americans shook their heads, predicting that if the enemy struck Muong Soui, the neutralists would scatter like chaff before the wind.[100]

Nevertheless, time was on the government's side. General Walt committed twenty-two hundred sorties to the Seventh Air Force to be used as General Moore saw fit. Moore earmarked them for Steel Tiger, allowing jets from Thailand to be dedicated to Barrel Roll. Additionally, thirty-two sorties per day were scheduled for northern Laos, with extra aircraft fragged "on hard intelligence." A tactical air control system, including an airborne battlefield command and control center (ABCCC) RC–47[101] and more forward air controllers, was formed to control and divert strike aircraft. A–1Es from the 602d Air Commando Squadron were sent on temporary duty from South Vietnam for the rest of the dry season. These planes (call sign Sandy) assisted in the visual reconnaissance/forward air controller role along with the normal rescue combat air patrol duties with the search and rescue force.[102]

In view of these preparations, Secretary of Defense McNamara stipulated that first priority in air operations was to be given to "what Westmoreland calls the 'extended battlefield,' i.e., South Vietnam, Laos, and Route Package I of North Vietnam." Attacks on other targets, especially those in Route Packages II through VIB, were not to be carried out unless no legitimate targets existed on the "extended battlefield." McNamara's orders did not specifically mention Barrel Roll, but it

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98. The original words in the message, "it did not seem logical," had been lined out.
99. Msg, CINCPAC (Adm Sharp) to COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland), 100143Z Apr 66.
100. Msgs, CINCPAC to AIG 921, 050422Z Apr 66, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 090246Z Apr 66.
101. Sullivan wanted some control over the Barrel Roll air strikes, and Seventh Air Force was concerned that planes going north could not pick up the C–130 ABCCC. The RC–47 (Dogpatch) operation was very "loose" initially. The intention to use the aircraft as a radio relay did not work out too well because of language barriers, communication equipment problems, and terrain interference. The temporary duty crews had been given no training, so they had little idea of how to perform or what was expected of them. Crews were briefed at Udorn by CAS and 7th/13th personnel, and orbits were chosen more or less relative to where strike activity was planned or anticipated. Crews picked their way to the scene, with routes selected to avoid a fixed pattern, to bypass flak batteries, to circumvent weather, and to take advantage of terrain. By July 1966, permanent personnel arrived and began to replace the original three-month temporary group, and a semblance of order gradually emerged. [Robert M. Burch, *The ABCCC in SEA* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1969), pp 7–9.]
102. Msg, COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 121125Z Apr 66.

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was clear that northern Laos did not fit Westmoreland's definition. However, the Defense Secretary did not order a sortie cutback.[103]

The Barrel Roll program was still a modest one. From April 15 to April 28, the Air Force flew 2,101 strike sorties in Laos with just 435 flying north. The T–28 Fireflies added 162 sorties, and Bango/Whiplash planes supplied 111 interdiction and 13 close support sorties in the vicinity of Phou Kout and Muong Soui. The Navy and Marines contributed 484 sorties—all in Tiger Hound. The major endeavor in Barrel Roll centered on storage and supply facilities around Samneua, Ban Ban, and along Routes 6, 65, and 7. Other missions included the Xieng Khouang airfield and a restrike of RLAF Target 217, the Ban Liang military complex near Khangkhai. Numerous roads were cut; and armed reconnaissance claimed 33 trucks destroyed.[104]

There were some phenomenal, but unconfirmed, results. On April 18, a roadwatch team, from a distance of five hundred yards, witnessed a strike on two enemy battalions located about nine miles from Samneua. The team claimed all the bombs hit the target, killing about three hundred troops. On April 24, an A–1E forward controller directed a jet strike on a North Vietnamese headquarters. He reported exceptional accuracy, with about 75 percent destruction and an estimated two hundred enemy soldiers killed.[105]

Despite these air attacks, the communists did not appear to slow down. In early May, CAS roadwatch teams reported an increase in enemy troop and vehicle movements along Routes 6 and 7. No one was sure if the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao were gearing up for the long anticipated assault on Muong Soui or if the movements were related merely to stocking for the rainy season, foraging, and bolstering local security. One thing was certain—the communists still had enough muscle to mount a multibattalion strike without warning. On May 11, for example, they attacked Ban Song, a remote lima site about fifteen miles southeast of Lima Site 27 (Houei Thom). After a stubborn two-day defense, the Meo garrison of 800 withdrew, together with 650 old men, women, and children.[106]

Vang Pao kicked off a drive at about the same time to retake Muong Hiem (Lima Site 48). It fell on May 10 and by May 23, the Military Region II commander had surrounded Na Khang, his ultimate objective. Inclement weather that day in North Vietnam canceled Rolling Thunder, and eighteen fighters, each carrying three thousand pounds of bombs, were diverted to Na Khang. As the jets swooped in, USAF forward air guides saw the enemy break and run. It was too late; the bombs cascaded squarely on the fleeing troops. Americans inspecting the battlefield later declared Vang Pao's estimate of three hundred killed by air a conservative one. For the next three weeks, the Meo mopped up communist pockets and beat off patrols probing the defenses of the various sites along Route 6. Even though Na Khang was back in his hands, Vang Pao did not reestablish it as a major operating base because he did not want to provoke a strong enemy reaction in the 1966–67 dry season.[107]

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103. Msg, SECDEF (McNamara) to CINCPAC, 162229Z Apr 66.
104. *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Apr 15–28, 1966; msgs, JCS to Dir/NSA, 150355Z Apr 66, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 246, 160500Z Apr 66, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 031024Z May 66.
105. Warren A. Trest and SSgt Dale E. Hammons, *USAF Operations from Thailand, 1966* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1967), p 73.
106. Msgs, CINCPAC to DIA, 030417Z May 66, ADMINO CINCPAC to Adm Sharp, 112320Z May 66.
107. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 303, 140532Z May 66, 336, 280530Z May 66; *DIA Intelligence Bulletin*, 113–66, Jun 13, 1966, p A–12.

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Chapter VIII

The Stalemate Continues (U)

(U) From the beginning of Steel Tiger, General Westmoreland had tried to persuade Ambassador Sullivan to employ napalm along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. On January 6, 1966, at Udorn, he proposed its use for Tiger Hound, stressing that all sorties would be under forward air controller direction and in areas occupied only by enemy troops. Sullivan turned him down, prompting the Army general to record,

> Ambassador Sullivan is keenly sensitive to local political problems and in the guise of these is getting involved in details of military operations concerning which he has a marginal feel. The discussions became somewhat intense as we debated the necessity of the restrictions he had imposed.[1]

(U) The ambassador did forward Westmoreland's request; and although CINCPAC supported COMUSMACV, Washington once more refused to sanction napalm except in a "highly critical situation." Interdiction did not meet this criterion, and introducing napalm during the Rolling Thunder bombing halt was judged out of place.[2]

(U) Sullivan broke the ice by approving napalm on February 18 for the defense of Lima Site 36, and on March 8, Westmoreland and Moore asked to be allowed to use the ordnance in Steel Tiger under FAC control. If the ambassador approved, aircraft from South Vietnam loaded with napalm could be diverted to Laos. This would save iron bombs, particularly when low ceilings prevented high-explosive delivery. Since Brig. Gen. Thao Ma, RLAF commander, had asked Sullivan for napalm on several occasions, General Westmoreland suggested giving it to him—if Souvanna Phouma approved. The ambassador relayed the request to Washington, and his cable showed he was not as unbending as some of his critics claimed. The cable also showed how far his thinking on napalm had come in two years and showed that he no longer worried about the United States being accused of using the ordnance to escalate the war. The communists had been charging the United States with this for the past fourteen months, and he saw little likelihood of them wringing any more propaganda value out of it. His one overriding concern was a short round that resulted in suspension of all Air Force and Navy operations in Laos.[3]

(U) The administration knew napalm would render overall air operations in Steel Tiger more flexible but was also concerned about short rounds.[4] If napalm was used, Washington wanted it tightly controlled, meaning tied into Steel Tiger forward air controller procedures. If Souvanna agreed, Sullivan could authorize napalm—but only against RLAF-approved targets under FAC

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1. (U) General Westmoreland's Historical Briefing, Jan 10, 1966.
2. (U) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 719, Jan 6, 1966, CINCPAC to JCS, 120020Z Jan 66, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 474, Jan 18, 1966.
3. (U) Msgs, COMUSMACV to AmEmb Vientiane, 110255Z Mar 66, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 984, Mar 14, 1966.
4. (U) As U. Alexis Johnson wrote to Cyrus Vance: "Bill Sullivan must attempt to explain to the Prime Minister what has happened and, in addition to the loss of life and property damage to innocent persons, we have to consider the loyalty of villagers to Souvanna. . . . While appreciating the problems of the pilots. . . . and the risks to which they are subject, I deeply feel we should most urgently search for some way of at least sharply reducing these . . . costly mistakes." [Ltr, Dep Under SECSTATE for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson to DEPSECDEF Cyrus Vance, no subj, Mar 8, 1966.] It should be noted that the number of sorties in Laos had gone way up while the incident rate (sorties flown versus short rounds) had gone down.

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control. Napalm could still be dispensed anywhere in Laos during an emergency "or in a situation in which the particular offensive or defensive military action already undertaken would otherwise fail"—this rule had not changed. Washington emphasized that no one was to admit or confirm that napalm was being dropped along the trail.[5]

Although General Westmoreland was in part successful, the rules set forth by Washington (approved the next day by Souvanna) barred the use of napalm on fleeting targets. Westmoreland protested that it was absolutely essential that every means at hand be available to destroy enemy trucks, vehicle parks, and moving targets on the trail. Sullivan replied that, while Souvanna had agreed to the use of napalm against trucks caught along the roads, this had met with "resounding silence" in Washington. The ambassador implied his hands were tied, but he sought clarification from the State and Defense Departments in light of his discussions with the Laotian prime minister.[6]

Souvanna's position stimulated a reconsideration by the administration, which finally decided that napalm could be dropped on any target of opportunity discovered by Cricket, Spooky, or Tiger Hound FACs. In addition, MACV could dispense it on motorized vehicles coming down the trail and on antiaircraft/automatic weapons firing at aircraft. In both cases, the strikes had to be directed by forward air controllers; and truck parks could not be hit unless they were numbered RLAF targets. Other than trucks, fleeting targets (such as river, barge, and sampan traffic) did not qualify as legitimate napalm targets.[7]

Near the end of April 1966, the success of the increased air campaign in Barrel Roll induced the Seventh Air Force to request Sullivan to allow napalm in that area on the same categories of targets as in Steel Tiger. FACs were scarce in northern Laos, and General Moore suggested assigning validated RLAF targets as alternates whenever controllers were unavailable. The ambassador at once vetoed the "free use" of RLAF targets as alternates for napalm strikes, citing the constant shifting of friendly and enemy positions. He wanted unused napalm returned to base or released on North Vietnamese Army targets along Route 7.[8]

General Westmoreland added his voice to the debate. He recognized the problem of constantly changing friendly positions and agreed with bringing napalm back to base. However, with the iron bomb shortage, he was not enthusiastic about dropping the ordnance in a "dump area," wanting to make every sortie count. Moreover, because of each mission's different "profile," hitting NVA targets in the vicinity of Route 7 posed problems; but he was willing to make these strikes as a last resort. Even so, he reminded Sullivan of how much more could be wrung out of each Barrel Roll mission carrying napalm if they had approval to hit all RLAF-validated targets when under FAC control, Vientiane-designated RLAF targets when FACs were unavailable, and vehicle traffic and active gun positions in an armed reconnaissance area.[9]

The ambassador mulled over Westmoreland's message for a week. On June 8, he took an action that mirrored the changing conditions in Laos. He approved napalm for RLAF validated Barrel Roll targets if the planes were under FAC control, for motorized vehicles, and for enemy gun positions firing on an aircraft. Sullivan also listed six targets, three along Route 7 and three on Route 65, that could be struck whenever FACs were not available. He asked only that crews be briefed on the significance of precise navigation and target identification to assure accurate delivery on true targets.[10]

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5. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 602, Mar 24, 1966.
6. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1024, Mar 25, 1966, COMUSMACV, SECSTATE, 1034, Mar 30, 1966, SECSTATE, 1048, Apr 2, 1966, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 311203Z Mar 66.
7. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 060958Z Apr 66.
8. Msgs, 7th AF to COMUSMACV, 210125Z Apr 66, 241115Z May 66, AmEmb Vientiane to COMUSMACV, 050500Z May 66, 261000Z May 66.
9. Msg, COMUSMACV to AmEmb Vientiane, 301020Z May 66.
10. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 080440Z Jun 66.

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The "precise navigation" Ambassador Sullivan wanted was still hard to come by in northern Laos. During the defense of Na Khang, the tacan on Skyline Ridge had been barely adequate for the area. A location that would enable the tacan to cover Barrel Roll and offer high-altitude guidance for planes going to and from North Vietnam was sorely needed. Eventually, Lima Site 185 was tentatively selected as a new tacan site. This was a Meo enclave deep in enemy territory, roughly thirty miles west of Samneua. While Vang Pao thought the navigational aid could be set up at Lima Site 185 without much trouble, he worried over security. The North Vietnamese constantly swept the area, and he felt a better location was Lima Site 85 at Phou Phathi. This karst ridge of fifty-five hundred feet was situated just seventeen miles from North Vietnam's border but, unlike Site 185, would need some time to prepare. Either locale could also serve search and rescue helicopters as a forward staging base.[11]

During the spring of 1966, there was still some thought given to placing a tacan at Na Khang (Lima Site 36), but Sullivan had disapproved this when Vang Pao recaptured the village and decided not to reestablish it as one of his main bases. Sullivan also did not want the tacan at Muong Son (Lima Site 50) because, without nearby Lima Site 36 for support, it was highly vulnerable to a communist takeover.[12] On June 8, the ambassador proposed two peaks on Skyline Ridge that required little site preparation. One rose seventy-two hundred feet, the other fifty-two hundred feet. He also asked if some place near Luang Prabang would suffice, but the 1st Mobile Communications Group had surveyed nearly all these sites and found them unsuitable for various reasons. Finally, on June 29, General Bond again suggested Lima Site 36 or Lima Site 85.[13]

After consulting with his [redacted] advisers, Sullivan considered the security at Phou Phathi (Lima Site 85, long a Meo stronghold) sufficiently strong to warrant the navaid being placed on its summit. To avoid the introduction of additional American personnel into Laos, he wanted periodic maintenance done by the "circuit-riding tacan technicians" manning the set at Skyline Ridge. Sullivan also wanted a low-frequency radio beacon set up at Lima Site 85 to provide a dependable navaid in northeastern Laos for planes that were not equipped with tacan. Admiral Sharp endorsed the TRN–17 tacan and low-frequency beacon for Phou Phathi on July 14. The equipment was moved to the site on September 6, and it was installed and flight checked by the 24th. As with the Saravane and Skyline sets, the tacan was stripped of military markings and serial numbers and repainted.[14]

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While Vang Pao was busy regaining the lost lima sites, reports from Vientiane and Savannakhet indicated that the FAR General Staff was trying to oust RLAF Chief Thao Ma, who had been a controversial figure in the Laotian political/military arena for some time. Since he was not a member of the hereditary elite but a self-made man who had risen from the ranks, his position of power was deeply resented by many Laotian generals. Nonetheless, he had proven to be a strong and effective military leader and, in terms of American values, had earned a place of respect.[15]

Thao Ma's troubles had begun when he was the protege of General Phoumi. Many FAR officers had long resented this association, especially his willingness to go out of channels to

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11. Msgs, Det 5, 6499th Spt Gp, to 2d AD, 181400Z Mar 66, Dep Comdr, 2d AD/13th AF, to CINCPACAF, 221010Z Mar 66; Capt Edward Vallentiny, *The Fall of Site 85* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1968), p viii.
12. Sullivan's fears were well founded. On the night of June 16/17, about two hundred Pathet Lao/NVA troops attacked the site, but the Meo held on after being reinforced. [Msg, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 250230Z Jun 66.]
13. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 080915Z Jun 66, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to CINCPACAF, 291054Z Jun 66, CINCPACAF to AIRA Vientiane, 022243Z Jul 66.
14. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, SECSTATE, 105, Jul 12, 1966, CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, 140152Z Jul 66, 1st Mbl Comm Gp to CINCPACAF, 290907Z Aug 66; *USAF Communications and Air Traffic Control Operations in Southeast Asia, 1960–1973* (Richard-Gebaur AFB, Mo., 1976), pp 39–40 [hereafter cited as *Air Traffic Con Ops*].
15. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2201, 120600Z Mar 66.

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secure support from Phoumi. However, when Phoumi fled to Thailand, there was no longer a buffer between Thao Ma and the other generals. The first rumblings of a showdown were heard in early July 1965 when Kouprasith Abhay began circulating rumors that Thao Ma was planning a coup and that he (Kouprasith) intended moving against him. The RLAF leader disavowed any such intentions and told Ambassador Sullivan he would fight if attacked. He said Kouprasith, Ouane Rathikone, and Oudone Sananikone were after him because he would not use the three C–47s based in Vientiane for opium and gold smuggling. He further charged the "Vientiane clique" with wanting to fly the transports on personal trips and to use them as a fee-charging cargo/passenger airline.[16]

(S) To head off trouble, Col. Clarke T. Baldwin, Jr., USA, met with Ouane Rathikone, the FAR Commander in Chief, on July 28, 1965. The Army attaché reminded Ouane that without Thao Ma's loyalty in the February Phoumi/Siho coup, the General Staff might have been deposed. Baldwin added that the RLAF chief was an excellent pilot and an aggressive leader commanding the loyalty of his men. (This could not be said for many Laotian officers.) Moreover, the Americans knew that Thao Ma was being treated as a GM commander and that, despite the RLAF's increasingly important role, he was not getting proper General Staff recognition. Baldwin agreed that Thao Ma had faults, noting that for the past three years, Colonel Tyrrell, air attaché, had tried to bring the RLAF commander to a better understanding of General Staff problems. Only it was not a one-way street-the Army attaché urged Ouane to promote some RLAF personnel (there had been no promotions in the air arm for over a year) and to bring the RLAF into General Staff planning.[17]

(S) Ouane conceded Thao Ma was an outstanding pilot, but he claimed the airman was so deeply immersed in the T–28s that logistic airlift planning had been neglected. He had decided, after much thought, to give Thao Ma two deputies, one for tactics and the other for logistics. Ouane expected the new logistics branch to work on all airlift planning and to "be responsive to the wider requirements of the FAR, or as desired by the General Staff." However, Souvanna Phouma shelved the reorganization, and Thao Ma's tenuous hold on the C–47s continued.[18]

(S) Vang Pao, also on the outs with the General Staff, was very unhappy about the treatment the General Staff had given his former superior, Maj. Gen. Khamkong Vongnarath. He was said to be sympathetic to southern officers who disliked the power wielded by the Sananikone family in Vientiane, and the Meo general did not hide his agreement with Thao Ma—the FAR generals should get out of politics and concentrate on fighting the Pathet Lao. Ouane, of course, complained that Vang Pao, like Thao Ma, was only interested in fighting. Ouane continued that Vang Pao did not consult with the general staff, although this problem was to be solved by assigning sixty junior officers, all recent graduates of Thai military schools, to the Long Tieng staff. Vang Pao refused to accept these men, citing ethnic differences between his people and them.[19] More than likely, the general and his CAS advisors easily saw through Ouane's backdoor attempt to gain control of the Meo army.

(S) Thao Ma and Vang Pao's discord with the "Vientiane coup mill" (as the Meo general called the General Staff) simmered for the next eight months. During this period, the neutralists floundered on the Plain of Jars, and General Kong Le's name was added to the list of officers the FAR wanted removed. The antagonism toward these leaders came to a head even as the communists were knocking on the gates of Muong Soui. On April 1, the General Staff, Kong Le, Thao Ma, and Souvanna Phouma discussed a reorganization of the neutralist army. The first hour

16. (S) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 2626, 051010Z Jun 65, 2779, 061225Z Jul 65.
17. (S) Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX–353, 281100Z Jul 65.
18. *Ibid.*
19. (S) Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX–346, 181100Z Jul 65, CX–353, 281100Z Jul 65.

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was taken up with a long-winded Kong Le discourse on international politics and wound up with the neutralist general reproaching Souvanna for failing to ask Indonesia for troops. (On his own, Kong Le had earlier approached the Indonesian chargé d'affaires for a division to reinforce Muong Soui.) Souvanna was said to have turned livid and finally ordered the ex-paratrooper to sit down and shut up. As the chastised Kong Le slumped in his chair, the FAR generals proposed that the neutralist battalions be rotated off the line one by one to Lop Buri, Thailand, for indoctrination and training. Following this, the units would be given royal commissions and returned to Laos for deployment wherever needed. They would keep their separate identities, but they would be under the control of the FAR military region commanders. Because Kong Le had admitted some of his troops were probably communists or had little will to fight, he had no choice but to accept the proposal. Later, however, neutralist personnel told Colonel Baldwin that Kong Le had merely agreed to discuss the plan with his officers.[20]

Thao Ma was called on the carpet at this meeting for being too independent of the General Staff. Ouane bluntly told the RLAF chief that his air force was not a separate service like the U. S. Air Force. It was an arm of the General Staff and had been allowed to call itself the Royal Laotian Air Force solely in deference to the U.S. Military Assistance Program structure. He additionally criticized Thao Ma for failing to delegate authority and for "mismanaging" the C–47s. Maj. Gen. Bounpone Makthepharak (Commander, Tactical Headquarters, South Laos) and Maj. Gen. Phasouk Somly (Commander, Military Region IV) administered the coup de grace when they accused Thao Ma of rarely giving them air support, since he was too busy helping the Air Force shoot up the Ho Chi Minh Trail.[21] These remarks prompted Ouane to insist that the principal mission of the T–28s was close air support, not interdiction.[22]

The FAR generals went on to blame direct U.S. support for Thao Ma and Vang Pao as greatly contributing to their independent attitudes. The generals wanted to rein in Vang Pao's "private war" by having Ambassador Sullivan channel all military aid through them. At an April 3 meeting held to resolve these points, Souvanna restated the General Staff's complaints. Sullivan passed the buck back, noting that the FAR had not set up a logistics section in Tactical Headquarters, North Laos; and until this was done, he would not act. He gently reminded Souvanna that Vang Pao's army was "outside" the Laos Military Assistance Program. Concerning the RLAF, the ambassador believed the T–28s and Thao Ma had done a good job and he was sure the Laotians could come up with a suitable solution to the C–47 problem. Souvanna concurred, and the conference adjourned with nothing really settled. Nevertheless, at an April 21 meeting (Souvanna was out of the country) Ouane asserted that Thao Ma was still being obstinate. He intended to replace him with the former RLAF Commander, Brig. Gen. Sourith Don Sasorith, when Sourith returned from the Army's Command and General Staff course at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.[23]

The thought of putting Sourith in Thao Ma's job alarmed William C. Hamilton, Far East desk deputy in ASD/ISA. He did not think it a good idea for a ground-oriented officer like Sourith to replace a flyer like Thao Ma just because a few generals could not get along with him. Having an Army officer over the "spirited T–28 jockeys" would, in Hamilton's mind, lower their esprit and military effectiveness. Furthermore, the interdiction effort in Steel Tiger depended on an RLAF contribution—a change of command at this stage solely benefited Ouane, the

20. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 227, 081220Z Apr 66.
21. Phasouk's accusation carried considerable weight since the Americans in Laos recognized he was an able commander willing to fight the Pathet Lao. In fact, most rated Phasouk and Vang Pao as the two top Laotian Generals.
22. Msg, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, 227, 081220Z Apr 66.
23. *Ibid*; msg, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 301912Z Apr 66.

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Sananikones, and the North Vietnamese Army. Hamilton got in touch with Leonard Unger, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. He requested Unger to cable the Defense Department's apprehension to Sullivan and ask the ambassador to speak with Souvanna to "save [Thao Ma] from the rockpile."[24]

However, the General Staff, in Sullivan's mind, had already maneuvered the RLAF leader into a fairly isolated position, particularly after his relations with Phasouk had gone downhill. Seemingly, Thao Ma had few supporters, except Col. Nouphet Daoheuang, Commander of GM 18, an old friend. In any showdown, Thao Ma would have only the threat of his T–28s. The ambassador predicted there would be a compromise that would either clip Thao Ma's wings rather sharply or tie him closer to the General Staff. Either way, the die was cast; and Sullivan meant to stay out of the squabble but would "continue to show a very close intellectual interest." What the ambassador did not know was that he was soon to be deeply involved "in this fire and boat drill."[25]

On May 11, Souvanna told Sullivan that Thao Ma was being relieved as RLAF Commander and that he would be sent to the General Staff as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. In this post, he would serve as an army rather than an air force officer and be would directly under Oudone Sananikone—an officer he detested. Sourith would take over the RLAF as soon as he arrived from the United States. Sullivan quickly realized that Thao Ma was finished. Even so, he accepted Souvanna's invitation to attend a meeting the next day in Savannakhet as part of a three-man commission to reach a compromise. The other members would be Ouane and finance minister Sisouk na Champassak (nephew of Boun Oum na Champassak). Sisouk considered Thao Ma honest, patriotic, and a good fighter but admitted that he was a poor administrator and a poorer politician. He agreed that the generals wanted Thao Ma under their thumb so they could use the C–47s for opium and gold smuggling.[26]

The commission's compromise allowed Thao Ma to remain as RLAF head, but the air arm's headquarters was moved to Vientiane and restructured along lines acceptable to the General Staff (in consultation with the embassy). Control of the transport planes went to a central transportation office (under the General Staff), with the RLAF furnishing personnel and the embassy a "watchful eye." The T–28s were also reorganized—as soon as the Pakse, Savannakhet, Vientiane, and Luang Prabang airfields were prepared to handle all phases of air operations, the forty-odd fighters were to be dispersed into four units, one to each base.[27]

One of the more interesting aspects of the Savannakhet "inquest" was that, while many RLAF staff officers were critical of Thao Ma and the way he ran the RLAF, all deferred to him as a flyer and fighter and none asked for his replacement.[28] They did resent his one-man show and his failure to share responsibility with his senior staff and believed the move to Vientiane would better the situation. "Crestfallen" at the criticism, Thao Ma meekly accepted the reorganization.[29]

Although this was a solution of sorts, Ambassador Sullivan acknowledged time was needed before harmony returned between the RLAF and the General Staff—and, more particularly, within the RLAF. Thao Ma had doubts about surviving "the shark-infested waters

24. Memo, William C. Hamilton, Dep Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA, to Leonard Unger, Under Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (through Rear Adm Francis J. Blouin, USN, Dir/FE Region, ASD/ISA), subj: Prospective Command Change in the RLAF, May 4, 1966.
25. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1165, May 7, 1966, 1170, May 9, 1966.
26. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, May 11, 1966, 1172, May 10, 1966, 1178, May 12, 1966, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 833, 111600Z May 66.
27. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1180, May 12, 1966, 1320, Jun 13, 1966.
28. There was no mention of the commission interviewing pilots who flew with Thao Ma.
29. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1180, May 12, 1966.

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[redacted]

of Vientiane," even though Sullivan assured him he had the life preservers handy. It was obvious the ambassador had his fingers crossed, hoping not to get "too big an albatross around our necks" as "we wet nurse this thing along." His well-known sense of humor prevailed through it all. When King Savang Vatthana sided against Thao Ma and asked Sullivan to assist in changing the RLAF Chief's ways, the ambassador quipped: "We have obviously been handed the baby on this one and my lap is already beginning to feel a little damp."[30]

(S) General Kouprasith—the prime force behind the move to bring Thao Ma to heel—later elaborated the complaints against the RLAF Commander to Colonel Pettigrew, air attaché. The RLAF was under American "control," Kouprasith contended, and the T–28s were being used for American and not Laotian interests. By this, he meant the fighters spent too much time on the trail and not enough in support of FAR ground operations. Kouprasith was also nettled because the RLAF received direct U.S. support and because Thao Ma was not hesitant to say that American training and leadership surpassed the French. Kouprasith's other comments confirmed to Pettigrew that Thao Ma had long been a thorn in the General Staff's side, chiefly because of his independence—as RLAF Commander, Thao Ma had refused to carry out orders he suspected were for a FAR general's personal gain, including illicit use of the C–47s and air support where he thought no enemy existed. Pettigrew was afraid the Thao Ma affair and the RLAF reshuffling would sap the air arm's overall effectiveness. Perhaps more important, if Thao Ma was cashiered (he was already considered a "lost cause" by Ambassador Sullivan), Vang Pao might be the next target of the FAR general staff.[31]

(S) As Colonel Pettigrew had feared, the Thao Ma/General Staff quarrel weakened RLAF operations. During the debate over Thao Ma's situation, T–28 combat sorties [redacted] came to a virtual standstill. In early June, the RLAF leader refused, agreed, and again refused to move from Savannakhet to Vientiane. For a few hours, it appeared he would resist Ouane by getting Colonel Nouphet's GM 18 to lead a coup. Things calmed down only when King Savang let it be known he wanted Thao Ma to command at least the tactical aviation branch; but beneath the calm, hard feelings persisted. Sullivan saw no end to his "cuddling and guidance."[32] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA

(S) During the summer of 1966, the feud between Thao Ma and the generals simmered underground, but things came to a boil on September 27. The RLAF was split into separate tactical and transport branches, and Sourith replaced Thao Ma, who went to the General Staff as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. He was also made Assistant Director of the Combined Operations Center, with control of the T–28s and the four air operations centers. Sourith took over the transports, and both branches were placed under the General Staff. Thao Ma reportedly was "delighted" with his new job. This was fine from the country team's point of view, since the integrity of the tactical air arm was preserved; but Sullivan correctly predicted, "I doubt we've really heard the last of Ma's troubles."[33]

(S) In midyear, as the monsoons swept northern Laos and the RLAF reorganization staggered along, the FAR General Staff presented plans for Operation Prasane, which involved Military Region I units, including FAR, Meo ADC, and RLAF (Prasane meant "coordination"). The objective of this three-phase limited offensive was to clear the Pathet Lao from Nam Bac and the Ou River valley in Luang Prabang Province. The nearly complete air operations center at

30. (S) *Ibid*; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1190, May 13, 1966, 1192, 1193, May 14, 1966.
31. (S) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 913, 250244Z May 66, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1875, Jun 3, 1966.
32. (S) Hist, CINCPAC, 1966, p 665; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1275, Jun 3, 1966, 1320, Jun 13, 1966, 1336, Jun 18, 1966.
33. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 901, Sep 20, 1966, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 600, 271115Z Sep 66.

[redacted]

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Luang Prabang airfield, similar to those jointly operated by the RLAF and Water Pump at Vientiane and Savannakhet was crucial to the operation. When the AOC was finished, Thao Ma would transfer six T–28s from Savannakhet to the northern airfield's newly lengthened and resurfaced strip; and Prasane could begin when the pilots knew the terrain. Phase I called for the T–28s to soften up three nearby short takeoff-and-landing sites lost to the communists—Nam Thouam, Nom Lak, and Pha Thong—followed by attacks from the FAR and ADC. Phase II included airlift of 420 men into Nam Thouam and an airlift of two battalions of GM 11 (1,000 men) into Pha Thong. Phase III was a drive by the FAR into Nam Bac from these sites, while other units blocked the enemy's escape to the east (Phase III).[34]

(S) The embassy had urged this offensive for some time. If successful, the RLG would regain an important area lost at the time of the Geneva accords, placing the FAR in a favorable position to block the traditional invasion route up the Ou River valley from Dien Bien Phu to Luang Prabang. Since the operation was planned to start around July 18, the monsoon should stifle any enemy reaction. Col. Robert S. Ferrari, USA, the new DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, believed Operation Prasane would get the new RLAF/FAR organization off to a good start and be "a common feather in the caps of Ouane and Ma." Unlike Operation Triangle or the numerous assaults on Phou Kout, the United States did not furnish any arms or equipment because the Royal Laotian Government troops were reasonably well trained and equipped. However, the embassy was asked to augment the helicopter airlift of the GM 11 battalions. If Air America was used, ten helicopters would be needed for two days, severely curtailing the airline's resupply missions, already behind because of the rain. For Prasane, Emory C. Swank wanted to enlist four USAF CH–3C helicopters flown by Air Force crews from Nakhon Phanom to staging areas close to Luang Prabang. As soon as the Laotian troops were assembled and the airlift completed, the aircraft would return to Thailand.[35]

(S) For this airlift job, Swank had in mind the 20th Helicopter Squadron at Udorn and Nakhon Phanom on temporary duty from the 14th Air Commando Wing at Nha Trang. The 20th's original mission had been assisting in counterinsurgency operations in northern Thailand when requested by Ambassador Martin. Due to the CH–3 shortage, the squadron's role soon evolved into delivering, retrieving, reinforcing, and resupplying clandestine 34–A intelligence and sabotage teams in North Vietnam. It also occasionally ferried MACV guerrilla teams (coded Shining Brass and Prairie Fire) into the panhandle of Laos near the South Vietnamese border. With these special missions, the crews had properly begun to call themselves the Pony Express.[36]

(S) On July 15, Thao Ma asked Lt. Gen. William C. Momyer, the new Seventh Air Force Commander, for a three-week loan of two Cricket O–1 aircraft from Nakhon Phanom. The USAF pilots would fly visual reconnaissance and serve as forward air controllers for the RLAF and USAF strike aircraft fragged for Operation Prasane, and Thao Ma would supply the Laotian observers. This was the first time the Air Force had operated out of Luang Prabang, and the RLAF chief asked that the O–1s have removable insignia—RLAF on the ground, USAF in the air. In line with these rules, the FACs would wear civilian clothes on the ground and flying suits while airborne.[37]

(S) The State Department was willing to help the FAR with Cricket FACs but had serious doubts about using USAF helicopters. Participation by the 20th Squadron would pass over the

34. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1336, Jun 18, 1966, 4, Jul 1, 1966, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX–471, 140545Z Jul 66.

35. (S) Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX–471, 140545Z Jul 66, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCUSARPAC, 150850Z Jul 66, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 137, Jul 14, 1966.

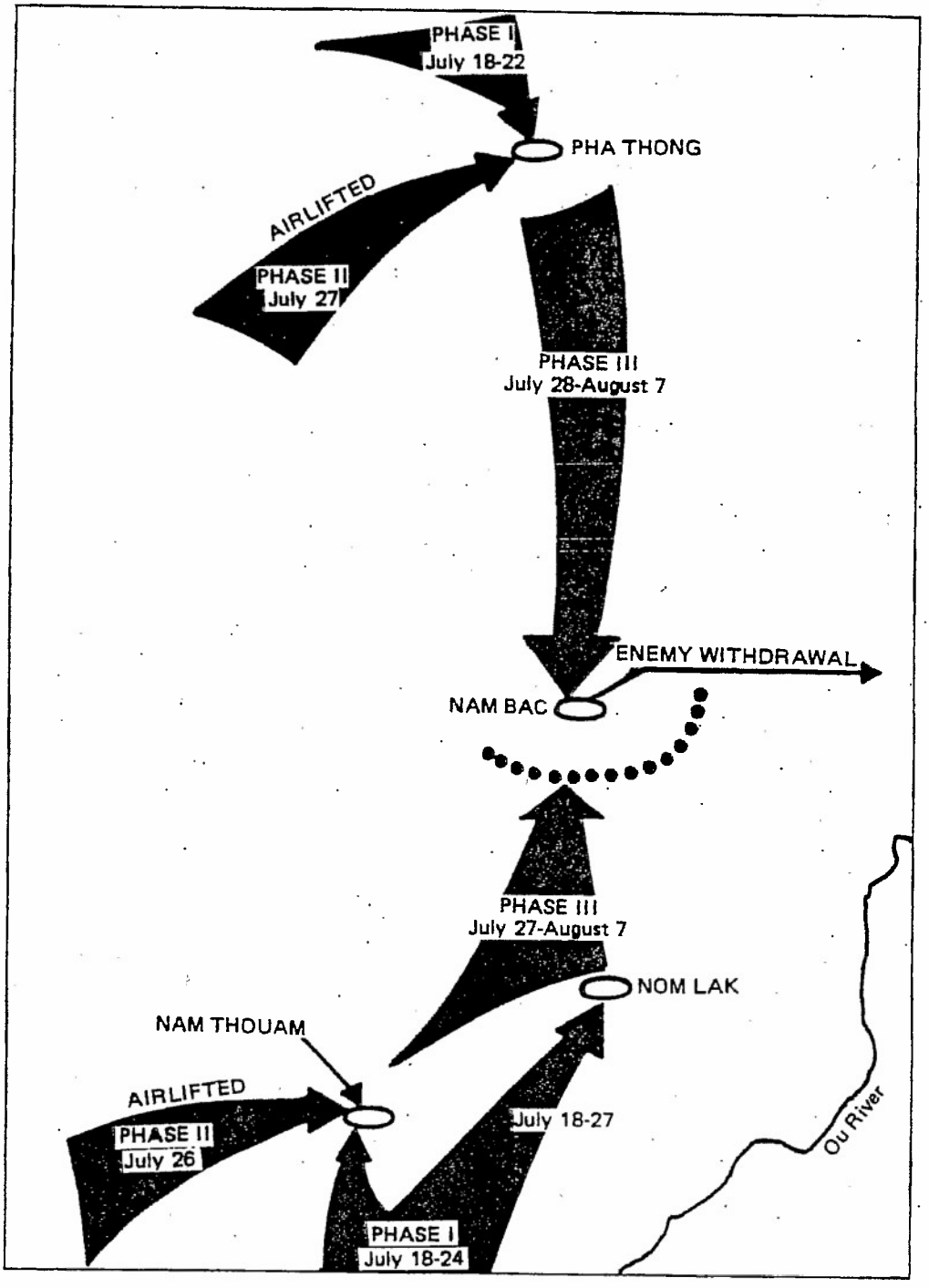
36. (S) Msgs, CINCPACAF to COMUSMACTHAI, 262145Z Mar 66, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 212320Z May 66.

37. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 150320Z Jul 66.

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fine line between providing tactical air support and engaging in Laotian ground operations. The magnitude of Prasane also disturbed the State Department, for the operation was in an area just sixty miles from Dien Bien Phu and came at a time when the king and prime minister were out of the country. Consequently, unless Souvanna requested the helicopters, they would not be used in place of Air America, even though this might over task the airline's assets.[38]

Operation Prasane began on July 18 and met only sporadic enemy resistance. Pha Thong fell on the 22d; and by July 30, all Phase I objectives were in FAR hands. During July 16–29, the RLAF flew 71 sorties from Vientiane and 110 from Luang Prabang.[39] Thao Ma claimed the T–28s destroyed sixteen large motorized piroques on the Ou River, each reported to be loaded with twenty to thirty bags of rice weighing 220 pounds. On July 26 and 27, the Air America airlift of GM 11 went off without a hitch. During the airlift, the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron assumed the search and rescue responsibility for all of Laos, and the 20th Helicopter Squadron made a delivery for [redacted] on the Bolovens Plateau. Phase II neared completion by July 30, somewhat behind schedule in rain that had become quite heavy. Government forces pushed forward and captured Nam Bac on August 7 with little enemy resistance. The Pathet Lao had apparently melted away.[40]

(b)(1) STATE

Except for patrolling and harassment, the monsoon then brought all military operations to a virtual standstill; and the Mekong was approaching flood stage at Vientiane by August 23. Two weeks later, Wattay Airfield was under a foot of water, and Air America and Continental Air Service[41] operations had shifted to Udorn. This stretched each northern sortie by seventy-five miles and further decreased rice and commodity airlifts. The weather also hampered RLG efforts to clear the Ou River and Nam Bac valley. The flood waters in the upper Mekong did not begin to recede until September 20.[42]

After the FAR General Staff clamped down on Thao Ma, it soon turned to another sore spot—General Kong Le. It was no secret in Vientiane that men like Ouane and Kouprasith had for some time wanted to bring the twelve thousand-man neutralist army under their control; the only question was when and how. In early October, while Souvanna was in New York to address the United Nations General Assembly, Sullivan and Baldwin got wind of a conspiracy among the ranking neutralist officers to unseat Kong Le. It was afterwards determined that the FAR General Staff had consented to the ouster but did not interfere. The plot included a reorganization of the neutralist army that retained the staff at Vang Vieng for administrative and disciplinary purposes but gave the FAR operational and logistic control, kept the army intact but divided it into four GMs, and gave each of the three ringleaders (Col. Soulivanh Singhavara, Lt. Col. Sing Chanthakouman, and Col. Somphet Sotsavan) a GM as his reward, (the fourth commander was named later). The General Staff agreed to accept all neutralist officers into the FAR, with their present ranks retained until confirmed by royal decree. With Souvanna's absent, Sullivan instantly adopted a "hands off" policy for the country team. The State Department supported the ambassador's stand and sent word of the impending coup to the prime minister in New York. It was too late—on October 16, Kong Le received a "forced invitation" from Colonel Somphet to

38. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 126, Jul 16, 1966, JCS to CINCPAC, 701, 190001Z Jul 66.

39. References to Air Force strikes in support of Operation Prasane are not found in any source. PACAF Intelligence Bulletin 31, Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia, July 1–July 31, 1966, notes only that the Air Force flew 310 Barrel Roll and 96 Bango/Whiplash sorties.

40. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 497, 230515Z Jul 66, 516, 300550Z Jul 66, DIA to AIG 7011, 240433Z Jul 66, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 300626Z Jul 66; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Aug 66.

41. Successor to Bird and Sons contract airline.

42. Msgs, CINCPAC to DIA, 231933Z Aug 66, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1140, Aug 25, 1966, JCS, SECSTATE, 734, Sep 7, 1966, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCUSARPAC, 100715Z Sep 66, CINCPAC to DIA, 200510Z Sep 66.

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leave Laos. The next day, Kong Le was aboard an RLAF C–47 bound for Udorn. The coup had been swift and bloodless.[43]

In analyzing Kong Le's ouster, several points seemed clear to Sullivan. Following a series of personal and military failures over two years, the general's once enthusiastic drive had withered to apathy and his men had turned against him. It was significant that Kong Le's own lieutenants led the coup and that all had been members of his old outfit, the 2d Paratroop Battalion. This unit had launched the paratrooper captain onto the world stage in 1960 and was a symbol of his authority over the neutralist forces. Through his own inadequacies and weaknesses, Kong Le had lost control of the 2d Battalion, and its members had played key roles in the conspiracy.[44]

It was likewise obvious that before he left for the United Nations, Souvanna thought Kong Le had outlived his usefulness. Hearing of the impending coup from the State Department, the prime minister merely requested reports on the situation. He carefully avoided any instruction to counter or even calm the actions against Kong Le, thus showing tacit acceptance of the coup.[45]

Kong Le's precipitous ouster from Laos was just four days old when sudden and dramatic events ensued. Around five in the morning on October 21, Thao Ma and Col. Bounleut Saycocie (an old coup plotter), seized Savannakhet airfield in what was Thao Ma's last-ditch attempt to resolve his long-standing feud with the FAR General Staff. By half-past eight, the Savannakhet-based T–28s were over Vientiane and started bombing and strafing FAR headquarters and Chinaimo Barracks. The artillery site and communications center at Wattay were hardest hit, resulting in twenty-three killed and sixty-five wounded. As the attacks proceeded, Thao Ma phoned Sullivan asking for his aid in pressuring Generals Kouprasith, Bounpone, and Oudone to resign. Instead, the ambassador put Deputy Prime Minister Leuam Insisiengmay on the phone. After speaking with Leuam, Thao Ma agreed to accept a mediation delegation and to allow Colonel Pettigrew's aircraft to land at Savannakhet. He further promised to keep his "eagles" grounded until the situation could be resolved. Nevertheless, the Thai, whose air space had been violated by the RLAF T–28s, began arming their own fighters for possible intercepts. At this point, General Momyer wisely suspended all USAF missions over Laos.[46]

Boun Oum, then in Vientiane, consented to head the peace delegation if the king approved. However, the king left the decision to Leuam. Sullivan persuaded the acting prime minister to treat this as a positive response and to ask the prince to make the trip. At this point, Boun Oum was at a loss about what he could reasonably be expected to accomplish in Savannakhet. So he, Leuam, Kouprasith, and Sourith decided to dig into a big Laotian lunch before settling on their next step. Meantime, Sullivan placed Wattay under aerial surveillance by an Air America aircraft that had radio contact with the Udorn tower. In addition, the Thai T–28s stood alert in case Thao Ma's planes came back across Thailand for another try.[47]

On the afternoon of October 21, the British ambassador, Boun Oum, and Sullivan flew to Savannakhet to talk with Thao Ma. Although acutely aware that he had failed, Thao Ma was adamant. Apparently, the former RLAF chief had counted on his friend, Colonel Nouphet, to arrest Generals Ouane and Bounpone while the T–28s got Kouprasith and Oudone. As Colonel Baldwin noted, "Had this worked out, he would have slain all his dragons at once." It had failed

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43. Msgs, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX–765, 071610Z Oct 66, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 150338Z Oct 66, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1262, Oct 15, 1966, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 1091, Oct 15, 1966, DIA to AIG 7010, 160506Z Oct 66, 190602Z Oct 66.
44. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1286, Oct 18, 1966.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2424, 2425, Oct 21, 1966, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 210712Z Oct 66.
47. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2432, Oct 21, 1966.

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because Nouphet decided to back out and Thao Ma made the critical mistake of telling the assistant air attaché at Savannakhet of his intention. The latter at once phoned Colonel Pettigrew who quickly alerted Oudone and Kouprasith. These officers had no sooner left FAR headquarters than the T–28s peeled off on their strafing runs.[48]

After returning to Vientiane, the ambassadors, the FAR General Staff, and RLG officials gathered at Leuam's house. After much discussion, Kouprasith induced Ouane to request Brig. Gen. La Pathammavong at regimental headquarters in Savannakhet to do whatever was necessary to restore order. La had earlier told Sullivan that he wanted to avoid force and would try persuasion. The next morning, his men walked in without resistance. Apparently, Thao Ma had realized the game was over (no other FAR officer had pledged support for the coup), and he and ten of his disenchanted pilots had flown their fully armed T–28s to Udorn during the night.[49]

The short flight from Savannakhet by Thao Ma's "Revolutionary Air Force" was not uneventful. As soon as the planes took off, the USAF radar at Mukdahan, Thailand, began tracking them. When "RLAF 315" requested a landing for twenty-five T–28s, the Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force TACC ordered all six F–102s to five-minute alert. Two of the jets were dispatched when Thao Ma's flight was about eighty miles south of Udorn with no radio contact. Another two F–102s followed twenty-five minutes later. These interceptors were orbiting the field when the tower gave the T–28s permission to land. One pilot who could not understand English touched down without any tower instructions whatsoever. A second T–28 ran off the end of the runway and was slightly damaged.[50]

According to Col. John E. Bridge, Seventh Air Force/ Thirteenth Air Force Director of Intelligence, the T–28s taxied smartly to their assigned parking spaces. Once out of the cockpit, the pilots sat around staring at the ground and looking like the losers they were. Under the glaring floodlights, Thao Ma seemed a badly shaken and very sick man. Two-time loser Bounlet was the least gloomy of the lot—he had been through it all before.[51]

By the afternoon of October 22, Thai Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn issued orders treating Thao Ma and his pilots as political refugees. Just the same, at a meeting of the Laotian cabinet and the General Staff, Kouprasith vigorously demanded the extradition of the airmen. There was the feeling that by being together in Thailand, Thao Ma, Kong Le, and Phoumi would hatch another coup. The Royal Thailand Government did not honor the request and released Thao Ma and his pilots, saying their attack on Vientiane was a political and not a criminal act.[52]

In retrospect, Thao Ma's attempt to bring down the FAR General Staff did not ever have a chance of succeeding. The one military figure allied with him was Bounleut; and the two infantry companies that took part merely occupied Savannakhet airfield. Thao Ma must have believed he had backing in some areas. Without this, his lashing out at his rivals never would have occurred, and he would not have been able to talk ten of his pilots into striking Vientiane. In the end, Thao Ma's downfall and exile were a real tragedy—he was an aggressive, anticommunist military leader in a country where aggressiveness of any type was in short supply. On the other hand, his ouster eliminated another maverick and removed an obstacle to

48. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2433, Oct 21, 1966, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX–751, 211600Z Oct 66.

49. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2449, Oct 21, 1966, 2452, Oct 22, 1966, DIA to AIG 7010, 220108Z Oct 66, ARMA Vientiane to DIA, CX–754, 220445Z Oct 66. Another pilot flew to Ubon. Nine T–28s stayed at Savannakhet. [Msg, USARMA Vientiane to DIA, 754, 220445Z Oct 66.]

50. Msg, AFSSO Udorn to AFSSO 7th AF, 220925Z Oct 66.

51. Msg, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 7th AF, Oct 23, 1966.

52. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2457, Oct 22, 1966; Trest and Hammons, p 52.

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the FAR General Staff. Vang Pao aptly summed up the situation, saying that Thao Ma had acted stupidly and dangerously, but the basic fault lay with Ouane and Kouprasith, who had backed him into a corner where he ended up in a senseless struggle for his life and career.[53]

During the 1966 rainy season, the fighting in Military Region II was light and scattered. When the weather improved in mid-September, there were signs that action was about to accelerate. On September 17, the communists seized San Tiau (Lima Site 2), a major Meo base south of Ban Ban. Vang Pao counterattacked, and five days later it was back in his hands. The enemy did not let up—during the last two weeks of September, roadwatch teams spotted over seventy-five trucks westbound on Route 7, the prelude of a dry season assault on the neutralists at Muong Soui. RLAF T–28s were fragged against the trucks but could not find them, and most observers believed the North Vietnamese had probably switched to moving only at night. This was confirmed on October 8, when a roadwatch team caught thirty-two trucks driving west on Route 7 at dusk and spotted twenty-eight more the next night. This led Colonel Pettigrew to ask the Seventh Air Force to schedule a special Barrel Roll strike, using, for the first time, the Douglas A–26K Counter Invader, an aircraft that had proved itself in Steel Tiger interdiction.[54]

Under the nickname Big Eagle, the Air Force had sent eight of these light bombers to Nakhon Phanom from England Air Force Base, Louisiana, for 179 days in early June. Since the Royal Thailand Government did not want B–26s on Thai soil because the designation "B" denoted offensive aircraft, the plane's designation was changed to A–26.[55] These were not the aircraft that had flown in World War II or Korea. They had been completely refurbished by the On Mark Engineering Company, Van Nuys, California. The aircraft—so new the Federal Aviation Administration certified it as a zero-time aircraft[56]—mounted fourteen fixed .50-caliber machineguns, three in each wing (later removed) and two rows of four in the nose. The eight external pylons could carry four thousand pounds of armament, and the strengthened wings allowed for added fuel. Bigger and more reliable engines replaced the older powerplants.[57]

The Seventh Air Force evaluated the Big Eagle A–26s in the Cricket area of the panhandle as part of its intensified night armed reconnaissance and interdiction. They flew in blacked-out single-ship sorties, randomly covering the various lines of communication to surprise the enemy and to prevent prediction of the next air strike. Normal tactics called for the crew to open fire with guns and rockets on unsuspecting targets, then pull up, drop flares, and continue the attack. Depending on the size and type of target, other strike and flare aircraft working in the area could be brought in, with the A–26 (call sign Nimrod) marking the target. The bombers had two crewmen, both FAC-qualified (Sullivan especially liked this feature). Thus, the A–26Ks not only made ideal hunter-killers but could control additional strikes if needed.[58]

The Big Eagle evaluation started on June 20, 1966. In the first four days, twenty-six daylight armed reconnaissance sorties were flown with the O–1 Cricket forward air controllers riding along to aid in area familiarization. During the second week of operations, thirty A–26

53. Trest and Hammons, pp 54–55; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Oct 66.
54. Msgs, DIA to AIG 925, 220320Z Sep 66, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 654, 240700Z Sep 66, ADMINO CINCPAC to Adm Sharp, 040400Z Oct 66, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 080456Z Oct 66.
55. The WW II Douglas A–26 Invader was given the B–26 designation in 1948 when the Air Force dropped the attack category. After extensive modification for counterinsurgency operations, the aircraft was designated B–26K. Because the "B" for "bomber" signified to Thai authorities an offensive-type aircraft, Air Force Secretary Harold Brown ordered the aircraft to be redesignated A–26K. The "A" designation, along with "O" and "F" on other USAF aircraft, all signified defensive operations. [Melvin F. Porter, *Interdiction in SEA, 1965-1966* (Project CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1967), 58.]
56. An aircraft that had not logged any flying time.
57. Anthony, pp 97–98.
58. Ltr, Det 1, 603d ACS, to 7th AF, subj: Concept of Operations, A–26 A/C, Jun 12, 1966.

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sorties were completed, six at night. Over this period, 15 tons of bombs, over 30,000 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition, and 107 flares were expended; but two bombers were damaged and another shot down. The Nimrods then assumed their prescribed role in night interdiction.[59]

No sooner had the A–26 night missions begun than the monsoons broke. From July 29 to August 12, forty-six sorties were canceled due to bad weather. A more thorough appraisal of the aircraft was required, and the evaluation period was extended through October 31. If the plane was determined to be a valuable addition to the Seventh Air Force[60] inventory by that date or sooner, General Harris planned to deploy follow-on aircraft in November.[61]

In early September, the Big Eagle commander, Col. Domenico A. Curto, suggested that his planes be used in areas other than Cricket, say Barrel Roll. The armed reconnaissance and loiter aspects of the A–26s enabled them to relieve other aircraft and supplement the entire interdiction effort. In Cricket, for example, six jets having an average loiter time of forty minutes were needed to fly the same target coverage as a single A–26. With twelve hours of darkness, thirty-six jets would have to be committed, but they could be released to other areas if A–26s were substituted. Moreover, since the Nimrods had gone to night operations, not one bomber had been lost.[62]

The Barrel Roll A–26 strike requested by Pettigrew was conducted on October 10. The roadwatch team that had served as forward air guide for the Nimrod reported ten trucks destroyed, the road heavily cratered just west of Ban Ban, and about fifty enemy killed by air in this strike.[63]

The success of the A–26s had a direct bearing on the cancellation of eight AC–47 gunships that were being programmed for Laos. For several months, General Momyer and his staff had been reevaluating Sullivan's request for AC–47s in night interdiction. Since December 1965, the gunships had been supplied by units in South Vietnam, and four had been lost along the trail. In fact, with the growth of enemy antiaircraft guns, the Seventh Air Force commander did not deem Laos a good place for any propeller driven plane. Propeller aircraft could be better used in areas of light or no defensive fire. Momyer judged it better to divert the promised AC–47s to South Vietnam and replace them with more suitable aircraft, preferably jet fighters.[64]

Ambassador Sullivan was enthusiastic about the A–26. On October 15, Colonel Pettigrew wired General Harris that the ambassador wanted serious consideration given to the early deployment of eight more Nimrods to capitalize on the expected upturn in enemy night traffic during the dry season. The air attaché additionally noted that Sullivan was agreeable to substituting these planes for the programmed AC–47s. General Momyer, however, did not believe the test results were sufficiently conclusive to warrant more A–26s, at least not until another sixty-day evaluation had taken place. Admiral Sharp went along with Sullivan, asking the JCS on October 22 to divert the AC–47s earmarked for Laos to South Vietnam. Although he admitted a detailed test evaluation on the A–26 had not been accomplished, Sharp thought the preliminary data justified the extra bombers. Delighted with the news from the "rug weavers" at the "Honolulu Bazaar," the ambassador at once released the eight AC–47s to South Vietnam.[65]

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59. Msg, CINCPACAF to 7th AF/13th AF, Aug 19, 1966.
60. All Thailand-based USAF aircraft belonged to the Thirteenth Air Force, not the Seventh, which retained operational control only. The rule of thumb was, "When they're in the air, they belong to Seventh; when they're on the ground, they belong to Thirteenth." [Personal recollections of the author.]
61. Weekly Activities Reports, Det 1, 603d ACS (Jun 18–24, 1966), Jun 25, 1966, (Jun 25–Jul 1, 1966), Jul 1, 1966; Warren A. Trest, *Lucky Tiger Combat Operations* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1967), p 7.
62. Debriefing rprt, Col Domenico A. Curto, Comdr, Det 1, 603d ACS, Sep 6, 1966.
63. Msgs, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 7th AF, 111507Z Oct 66, 7th AF to CINCPACAF, 170930Z Oct 66, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 731, 150620Z Oct 66.
64. Msg, 7th AF to CINCPACAF, Sep 5, 1966.
65. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPACAF, 150843Z Oct 66; Trest, pp 13–14.

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Sullivan had earlier proposed a conference at Udorn to draw up air plans for Barrel Roll during the dry season. At this October 25 meeting, General Momyer said the Seventh Air Force's ability to divert sorties on a moment's notice was superior to what it had been when the Bango/Whiplash alert was started by his predecessor. With the onset of bad weather in North Vietnam, there would be many diverted Rolling Thunder sorties that could be controlled by the improved ground tactical air control system and the airborne battlefield command and control center. He accordingly advocated (and Sullivan concurred) that Bango/Whiplash be discontinued on November 1. Preplanned sorties were still a must; and to take up the slack caused by the cancellation, northern Laos was allocated twelve A–1, eighteen F–104, and four A–26 sorties daily. Finally, procedures were adopted for meeting requests for emergency strikes.[66]

The A–26s were to be closely linked to the Meo roadwatch teams. Two of the English-speaking team commanders (Tall Man and Red Man) were very experienced in spotting moving trucks, porters, troops, and camouflaged truck parks and in passing this information to aircraft. [redacted] Tall Man was qualified as a FAG and had directed numerous USAF air strikes in northern Laos during the preceding year. Each of these team leaders commanded a system of radio-equipped Meo spotters concealed throughout the Samneua area along Routes 6 and 65. The spotters fed target locations and bomb damage assessment to their commanders or contacted Lima Site 36 to have the intelligence relayed. At times, friendly villagers functioned as part of the informant network passing (frequently exaggerated) target information or bomb damage assessment to the teams.[67]

(b)(1) (b)(3) CIA

The A–26 roadwatch team combination began auspiciously. On November 2, a team near Route 65 contacted an A–26 and furnished the crew a target of five trucks on the road about eight miles east of Samneua. The pilot flew to the area, located the trucks, and destroyed four of them. He continued down the road and chalked up four more truck kills. After A–1s were called in, the final score totaled fourteen vehicles. During the rest of the week, an additional fifty-three trucks, a bulldozer, and four gun positions were knocked out and three hundred enemy troops were killed. Bomb damage assessment was reported by the ground teams, and it correlated closely with results provided from the aircrews. By November 10, few trucks were running on Routes 6 and 65, most having moved to Route 7. From November 9 to November 17, a team on this road reported 258 westbound trucks. In response, a ground network like that used on Routes 6 and 65 was set up along Route 7.[68]

For the remainder of the month, bad weather hindered Barrel Roll interdiction. Several times, ground teams reported lucrative truck targets but the aircrews could not find them due to the low-hanging clouds. Thus shielded, the communists could truck enough supplies through to keep up their harassment of government positions, including the dawn attack by two or three Pathet Lao battalions against Tha Thom on November 24. The town changed hands twice during the day, winding up under communist control. General Kouprasith[69] immediately flew in reinforcements, and the RLAF[70] began hitting the enemy troops. Four days later, three FAR battalions retook Tha Thom following light resistance and found thirty-seven bodies, most of them killed by the air strikes. The 75-mm pack howitzers left by GM 17 were intact, but

66. Msg, 7th AF to COMUSMACV, 020900Z Nov 66; Weekly Activities Report (Oct 31–Nov 6, 1966), Det 1, 603d ACS, Nov 7, 1966.

67. Rprt, 7th AF/13th AF, Results of A–26 Air Strikes, Nov 15, 1966.

68. Msgs, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 7th AF, 031555Z Nov 66, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 816, 120600Z Nov 66, 7th AF to CINCPAC, 150900Z Nov 66; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Nov 66.

69. Although Tha Thom was in Military Region II, General Ouane gave Kouprasith the responsibility for retaking the town since Military Region V was closer and offered better logistic support.

70. Operations out of Wattay Airfield were resumed on November 10 after a twenty-day lull following Thao Ma's abortive coup.

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seventeen cases of hand grenades and an undetermined amount of M–1 ammunition were missing. For some unknown reason, recently harvested rice had been left untouched in the fields. The only other significant military action in November occurred at Muong Soui where the neutralist 85th Paratroop Battalion mounted a limited attack on November 16 and seized Phou Douk.[71]

Activity in northern Laos stayed at a low level during December. When several Meo ADC positions in northwest Luang Prabang Province were threatened, General Vang Pao struck first, occupying Muong Het (Lima Site 13) on December 18 without opposition. This extended the government's influence to within seven miles of the North Vietnamese border, but disturbing reports indicated the communists were dispersing troops into positions from which to launch major offensive operations in 1967. The Nam Bac region showed signs of becoming active once more, and buildups around Na Khang (Lima Site 36) and Phou Phathi (Lima Site 85) seemed ominous.[72]

At the end of 1966 [redacted] in Vientiane estimated there were 101 Pathet Lao, 18 Vietnamese, 12 dissident neutralist, and two Chinese battalions operating in Laos. The North Vietnamese Army had about twenty-eight thousand engineer personnel (including coolies) working on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The presence of nearly seventy-five hundred NVA infantrymen and another five thousand attached as "stiffeners" or advisors to the Pathet Lao were more important to northern Laos, since the Pathet Lao would probably have withered on the vine had it not been for this outside cadre. In fact, a captured North Vietnamese captain who had worked with the Pathet Lao characterized them as lazy, untrained, without basic military knowledge, and unwilling to learn. Whenever the North Vietnamese really wanted to secure an objective, they did the job themselves, demonstrating this on January 6 when their force of between six hundred and eight hundred men attacked Lima Site 36.[73]

(b)(1) STATE

Site 36 was a key Meo position, equally valuable to the Royal Laotian Government, the U.S. Air Force, and the North Vietnamese Army. It controlled Route 6, was a jumpoff point for friendly guerrillas and 34–A teams, and served the HH–3 Jolly Green Giants as a forward operation location. A very low overcast had covered the region for much of December, and the communists may have believed tactical air could not support the defenders. The NVA infiltrated the site's perimeter on the night of January 5/6, 1967, seeking to assault the main command post without engaging any of the Meo ADC outposts. The garrison was alert; and when the infiltrators were discovered, the main enemy body lay down a heavy mortar barrage. Around six in the morning, the major drive on the five hundred defenders began. The command post was pummeled from three sides, and the Meo were cut off from their chief withdrawal routes. At the time, the weather was precisely what the communists had hoped for—a solid overcast with many of the surrounding peaks spearing the clouds.[74]

The North Vietnamese first struck from north of the runway, then charged in from the south. Firing mortars and small arms into the site's quarters and operating area, they pushed to within one hundred yards of the main compound; and the hard-pressed defenders called for air support. Eight F–105s diverted from armed reconnaissance in Steel Tiger were first on the scene. After making radio contact with the remaining [redacted] the planes tried in vain to get down through the layers of clouds. Finally, Lt. Col. Eugene O. Conley found a small break in the clouds some distance from the site. Flying nearly blind, he snaked his way

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

CIA

71. *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Nov 66; JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 853, 260600Z Nov 66, 874, 030550Z Dec 66, DIA to AIG 7010, 300507Z Nov 66.

72. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 925, 240550Z Dec 66, 942, 210610Z Dec 66.

73. Msgs, AmEmb/ARMA/CAS Vientiane to CINCPAC, 1447, Sep 11, 1966, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 310332Z Dec 66, 280240Z Jan 67.

74. Msgs, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 7th AF, 060930Z Jan 67, 355th TFW to Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, 160835Z Jan 67.

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between the peaks toward the camp. When the two-hundred-foot ceiling kept him from lining up and delivering his ordnance, Conley buzzed the area trying to make the communists break off the attack. His repeated passes seemed to tell as the enemy assault slowed.[75]

Dragonfly 21 (Maj. Robert E. Turner) and Dragonfly 22 (Capt. John D. Haney, Jr.), from the 602d Fighter Squadron Commando at Udorn, had just unloaded on a bridge in Steel Tiger when they were ordered to Lima Site 36. It took the A–1s almost an hour to get back to Barrel Roll, where they faced the weather that had stymied the F–105s. Turner made contact with the [redacted] who, with shotgun in hand, was about to make an Alamo-like last stand. Leaving Haney at eight thousand feet, Turner spiraled down through the clouds and broke out squarely over the site.[76] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

Major Turner saw that the situation was grave. The enemy clung to both sides of the runway, the POL storage area, and the trees encircling the west side of the short landing strip. He knew the low ceiling ruled out jet strikes and that he would have to wait until other A–1s from Udorn or Nakhon Phanom relieved him. He not only had to deliver his ordnance effectively, but he also had to buy time as well. A USAF Butterfly forward air controller was now on the scene, and he told Turner anything outside the compound was fair game.[77]

The Skyraider pilot flew several passes, triggering rockets singly and firing short bursts from his 20-mm cannon to save ammunition. Slowly, he forced the enemy down from the compound hill and back across the dirt runway. His pattern of attack, confined by ceiling and terrain, was so low he often had to pull up off his run and into the clouds to avoid the trees and hilltops. When the Butterfly asked Turner to pin down troops among the POL barrels without igniting the gasoline, he strafed with 20-mm fire up to and around the barrels, and then resumed on the other side. Later, five enemy bodies were counted with just two of the fifteen barrels dented by ricochets. It was a remarkable one-man show.[78]

When Major Turner ran out of ammunition, he climbed back on top of the weather and led Captain Haney down to the site. The wingman recalled that, after circling down to where the weather was clear, he found it incredible that Turner had worked so low (the ceiling was still at two hundred feet) and under those conditions. What stuck in Haney's mind most was

> trying to shoot a man with 20-mm. There were two of them standing there shooting at me with their rifles. I put the pipper on one and squeezed the trigger and missed him. I was firing rockets at the time and the rocket hit the man directly behind him. It exploded on impact . . . and he just kind of disappeared.[79]

The two Skyraiders' crucial hour over the target spelled the difference between saving and losing the site during the initial assault. The pilots expended sixteen hundred rounds of 20-mm ammunition, four 100-pound white-phosphorous bombs, and fifty 2.75-inch rockets. Heavy and accurate ground fire scored hits on both planes, but not sufficiently serious to force them to break off the attacks.[80]

The ceiling began to lift and Butterfly 44[81] directed the incoming flights through the clearing weather. Firefly 11 and Firefly 12 (two A–1Es) swept in on the tail of the departing

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75. Msg, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 355th TFW, 060510Z Jan 67; Capt Melvin F. Porter, *Second Defense of Lima Site 36* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1967), pp 3–4.
76. Intvw, Proj CHECO hist, with Capt John D. Haney, Jr., 602d FSC, Feb 15, 1967.
77. *Ibid.*
78. *Ibid.*
79. *Ibid.*
80. *Ibid*; msg, 432d TRW to AIG 913, 060345Z Jan 67.
81. The numbers "22," "33," and "44," added to the Butterfly call sign identified the particular geographic area the FAC worked, the high numbers being used farther north. For example, Butterfly 22 was used chiefly in the Muong Soui area and west of the Plain of Jars, while Butterfly 44 was employed north of the plain.

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Turner and Haney, working over the drainage ditches and tree lines near the runway. They were followed throughout the day by overlapping flights of F–105s (the weather cleared completely by noon), A–1s, F–104s, and T–28s [redacted] This steady air support and the regrouped Meo defenders beat back the communists from the perimeter, allowing the slightly damaged airstrip to be reopened. Even though forty of the enemy had been killed by air (most of them attributed to Turner and Haney), the North Vietnamese Army remained in force around the camp. Vang Pao arrived during the day, but the Meo general could not put out patrols due to enemy snipers. The immediate threat to the site had subsided, but the fight was not over.[82]

(b)(1)
(b)(3)
(S)

CIA & STATE

(S) The night passed without incident, and the morning was clear enough for the Air Force to sweep the surrounding area. An English-speaking Meo forward air guide (Blue Boy) directed several A–1s against the nearby woods and other likely hiding places. The day's most striking event was the discovery of a detailed map of the area on a dead body. After studying the map, General Vang Pao surmised that the North Vietnamese were new in the area and had used the map's carefully drawn entry routes to guide their infiltration. If true, the enemy soldiers had most likely retraced their steps while trying to regroup. Accordingly, Vang Pao put a Meo observer in the backseat of a Butterfly's plane and instructed them to comb and recomb the suspected pathways to locate the communist force. The enemy troops, apparently lost, were soon found in a depression not far from one of the lines on the captured map. The FAC called in two A–1s that hit the area with white-phosphorous bombs, leaving it a smoldering blaze. The battle for Lima Site 36 was over, and it had been saved again by air power.[83]

(S) The final tally was sixty-three enemy dead, with numerous bodies disintegrated. Two North Vietnamese soldiers were captured along with twenty assorted weapons, and interrogation of one of the prisoners showed how intuitive Vang Pao had been. The prisoner disclosed he belonged to the North Vietnamese Army 174th Regiment that had entered Laos ten days before, traveling by truck at night to avoid being spotted by air. The prisoner said he had traveled the last eight miles to Na Khang on foot using just the annotated maps.[84]

(S) The Butterfly forward air controller that controlled the Na Khang air strikes was one of a group of FACs that had evolved from the handful of men that Ambassador Leonard Unger had pressed into service in 1964 for Operation Triangle. Like their predecessors, the Butterflies were air commandos and graduates of the combat controller school of the Special Air Warfare Center. They worked for the embassy, meaning they were outside the Seventh Air Force or Thirteenth Air Force chain of command. Unlike the Cricket FACs, Butterflies were enlisted men and nonrated officers who did not fly their own planes. They were flown in planes owned and operated by Air America and Continental Air Service. They sat either in the right front seat or the backseat and worked strike aircraft using a backpack radio with the antenna poked out the plane's window. When direct contact with friendly ground troops was impossible, the Butterfly often relied on conversations with RLG personnel before takeoff or the local Laotian/Meo commander riding with him to control the strike. The principal reason for developing the Butterfly program was to have Americans control USAF Barrel Roll sorties and avoid the short rounds that had intermittently plagued Steel Tiger. The program also gave the FACs a chance to live in the field with RLG personnel and become intimately familiar with the changing friendly and enemy positions in northern Laos.[85]

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82. (S) Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 1–67, 070432Z Jan 67; intvw, Capt Henry S. Shields, Proj CHECO hist, with Lt Col John G. Garrity, Jr., AIRA MR II Intel Off (1966), Dec 3, 1971.
83. (S) Intvw, Proj CHECO hist, with Capt John G. Roberts, 602d FSC, Feb 15, 1967; msg, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to 7th AF, 080735Z Jan 67.
84. (S) Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 4–67, 280610Z Jan 67, DIA to AIG 7010, 310210Z Jan 67.
85. (S) Capt Henry S. Shields, *USAF Control of Airstrikes in Support of Indigenous Lao Ground Forces* (Proj

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(S) Butterfly targets were developed rather informally. When a government outpost had target information, word was passed to Vang Pao at his Long Tieng headquarters by radio, Air America supply plane, or foot runner. The next day, a request went out for a Butterfly FAC; and the FAC, with a contract pilot and Thai interpreter, would fly to the outpost for a briefing. After landing, the Thai usually talked to the site commander, who might be a Meo and, pointing off into the distance, might say something like: "See smoke? Bad mans there. Go hit." Everyone piled back into the plane and headed for the smoke. En route, the FAC called for a strike aircraft. In the target area, the Thai again translated for the FAC who relayed the information to the strike pilots. All of this needed to be done before the jets ran out of fuel and returned home. Lt. Col. John J. Garrity, Jr., recalled this experience several years later:[86]

> After each ordnance pass, the whole translation interpreter problem started all over again as we tried to refine the target's location and get the idea across to the strike aircraft. To completely complicate matters, Butterflies couldn't use marker rounds and had to do the whole job by radio.[87]

(S) This procedure was repeated at the next site. On days devoid of specific air support requests, the Butterfly would find his own targets by general visual reconnaissance. These included entrenchments, foxholes, suspected troop concentrations, bridges, and military structures.[88]

(S) Marking rockets were prohibited because the FACs, while directing strikes, flew in planes that were owned by Air America and Continental Air Service. The only practical solution was for the FAC to talk to the pilots in very descriptive language. The FAC, after he was sure the lead knew where to bomb, asked him to put down a bomb as a marker. The rest of the flight then used that bomb as a guide. This method was not used when supporting ground forces, since short rounds were possible.[89]

(S) Beginning in mid-1966, Ambassador Sullivan allowed the Butterflies to drop smoke grenades and canisters over the side of contract aircraft, but the altitudes flown by the Air America or Continental pilots precluded accuracy. Finally, in October 1966, Colonel Pettigrew was given a U–6 fitted with radios and rocket rails to serve as a FAC ship. This plane was flown in Military Region II by a rated assistant air attaché who also used the Butterfly call sign, but it could not work from the short-takeoff-and-landing strips where it was still necessary to stop to confer with or pick up the local military observer. This made the use of contract aircraft mandatory, even though they could not mark the targets.[90]

(S) Most of a Butterfly's time was spent controlling USAF aircraft, but he would now and then work with the RLAF [redacted] Since the RLAF pilots were striking in their own country, they did not have the stringent validation and control requirements imposed on USAF pilots, although they often took advantage of the Butterfly's knowledge of target locations. (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

[redacted] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

[91]

ALL CIA

CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1972), pp 25–26.

86. (S) As a major, Garrity served as a Butterfly from February to June 1966 while an air attaché intelligence officer with Vang Pao's forces.

87. (S) Garrity Intvw, Dec 3, 1971.

88. (S) *Ibid.*

89. (S) *Ibid.*

90. (S) Shields, p 30.

91. (S) Garrity intvw, Dec 3, 1971.

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(S) The Butterflies often would have no strike aircraft to control. However, the next night, with virtually no warning, they might be deluged by Rolling Thunder diverts (who were usually short of fuel and needed an immediate target) and by Bango/Whiplash jets dropping in at the same time. This situation improved in April 1966 when the specially configured Dogpatch RC–47 was sent to Barrel Roll to act as an ABCCC. This plane carried a SSB radio to alert the Butterfly forward air controller on the ground that diverts were on the way. This enabled him to round up his interpreter/validation team, get airborne, and have his target ready by the time the jets got there. The RC–47 was shot down by North Vietnamese MiGs on July 29 when it wandered into North Vietnam, but another aircraft from South Vietnam quickly took its place.[92]

(S) One of the most noteworthy aspects of the program was the work of the Butterfly noncommissioned officers who managed to log many missions, often as many as eight a day. It was not unusual for an enlisted Butterfly to have five hundred missions to his credit after a six-month tour. CMSgt Charlie Jones flew between seven hundred and one thousand Butterfly sorties and acquired the handle "Super FAC" from the pilots he controlled. Chief Jones and his team always tried to be aloft in their Pilatus Porter and tuned to the proper radio frequency. This gave them the earliest possible notice of fighters diverted to their area and saved valuable time and jet fuel.[93]

(S) No precise figures are available about the number of Butterfly FACs that operated in Laos in these early days. Garrity recalled that, during his February to June 1966 association with the program, never more than one Butterfly was on station. Depending on his location, this FAC used other call signs; and Cricket FACs sent to work in Barrel Roll also called themselves Butterflies, further clouding the picture. Despite the slight increase in the number of controllers after mid-1966, there were probably no more than three at any one time.[94]

(S) Though repulsed at Lima Site 36, the North Vietnamese did not halt their attacks against the Royal Laotian Government. On the night of January 22/23, two NVA battalions hit the FAR/Meo redoubt at Nong Khang (Lima Site 52) fifteen miles north of Samneua. An 82-mm mortar barrage announced the assault around three in the morning, followed by an infantry charge marked by bloody hand-to-hand fighting. The communists did not break off until dawn when RLAF T–28s and USAF A–1s swooped in. By ten they had withdrawn, leaving behind sixty-five dead.[95]

(S) Undaunted by the losses, the North Vietnamese struck again. On February 2, a thirty-man unit staged a swift, early morning, surprise assault on Luang Prabang airfield using 40-mm rockets and automatic weapons. The commando raid, obviously preplanned in detail and well executed, lasted just twenty minutes but destroyed six T–28s, damaging three others, and put three H–34 helicopters out of action. Five FAR soldiers were killed and six wounded. The air operations center was 75 percent destroyed, but there were no American casualties. The debris was rapidly swept off the field, and the FAR searched in vain for the attackers. The next day, five T–28s were transferred from Wattay to Luang Prabang and flying resumed. In retrospect, the raid was significant, not for the RLAF losses incurred, but because it was the first time the communists struck in the vicinity of the royal capital. The communists may have attacked at this particular time since the king was in Vientiane for the opening of the new National Assembly, the election boycotted (as usual) by the Pathet Lao.[96]

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92. (S) *Ibid*; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 577, Jul 29, 1966, 7th AF to NMCC, 300001Z Jul 66, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 18604, Jul 30, 1966.
93. (S) Shields, p 31.
94. (S) Garrity intvw, Dec 3, 1971.
95. (S) Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 4–67, 280610Z Jan 67, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 280240Z Jan 67, DIA to AIG 7010, 310210Z Jan 67.
96. (S) Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 040700Z Feb 67, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 042304Z Feb 67;

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[redacted]

(S) Three days after the airfield raid, the North Vietnamese infiltrated near the [redacted] 155-mm howitzer position at Muong Soui and opened up with rockets, automatic weapons, and 60-mm mortars. The artillery suffered only slight damage, [redacted] The communists withdrew, only to bring up PT–76 tanks later with another sixty rounds. While there was no general attack, the enemy probed the neutralist outposts on the town's perimeter.[97] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

(S) During the rest of February, the enemy took advantage of an unseasonably heavy overcast that blanketed most of northern Laos. On the night of February 12/13, Lima Site 36's defenses were again tested, and over a hundred 82-mm recoilless rifle rounds peppered the defenders during a twenty-minute period on February 21. The shelling continued until an A–26 appeared and dropped flares and bombs. Although the Meo suffered no casualties, their barracks (rebuilt after the January 6 raid) were totally destroyed.[98] ALL CIA

(S) When the bad weather ran over into March, the RLG decided to try and turn the tables. Tactical Headquarters, North Laos, positioned troops in the Nam Hieng area to prepare for Operation Ban Kao (Old Village). The objective was to seize Ban Mok Plai (Lima Site 193), which would choke off enemy infiltration routes eastward toward Nam Bac and provide much-needed security for the villages and valleys leading to the Mekong River and Luang Prabang. Additionally, Ban Mok Plai would serve as a stepping stone for retaking Muong Sai, which King Savang Vatthana wanted returned to RLG control before the dry season ended. Previous tries for Ban Mok Plai had fizzled due to insufficient forces. This time, the FAR would use five Meo infantry and ADC battalions and a 105-mm howitzer section. With enemy strength estimated at three battalions, prospects for capturing the village seemed excellent.[99]

(S) The North Vietnamese struck first, disrupting the government's offensive. During the night of March 10/11, a force of two or three North Vietnamese companies attacked GM 11's defenses on the high ground north of Nam Bac's airstrip. This was followed by an assault against the artillery sites to the southeast. The communists managed to take the high ground near the strip but were repulsed in the other area. A counterattack drove them off the next day; but the airstrip was threatened by several small elements that remained, restricting it to helicopters and STOL aircraft. A body count confirmed forty-four enemy dead, apart from the number killed by 180 T–28 and 37 F–105 sorties flown in the site's defense. By the afternoon of March 12, the enemy had withdrawn and the airstrip was opened to fixed-wing aircraft.[100]

(S) With Nam Bac still secure, Operation Ban Kao began on March 12, resisted by only one dug-in enemy company south of Ban Mok Plai. This resistance was adequate, however, to stall the FAR drive at the outskirts of the village. The next day, the 40th Paratroop Battalion circled the airstrip from the northeast, and the isolated communists had to retreat. Considering the substantial depth now added to Nam Bac's defense, Ban Mok Plai was seen as the springboard for retaking Muong Sai. The FAR victory had been achieved with few casualties, but the government's success was short lived.[101]

(S) Over the next week, the North Vietnamese beefed up their troops with two new infantry battalions and, in the early hours of March 20, slammed into Ban Mok Plai's northernmost defenses. In spite of ninety-eight T–28 sorties, the situation worsened as enemy pressure increased.

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ltr, Col Robert S. Ferrari, USA, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, subj: Historical Summary, Deputy Chief JUSMAG Thailand for the Period (June 1966–April 1968), May 11, 1968; Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968.

97. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 118, 061045Z Feb 67.
98. (S) Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 161, 180605Z Feb 67, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 040304Z Mar 67.
99. (S) Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 219, 110815Z Mar 67.
100. (S) Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 238, 180550Z Mar 67.
101. (S) *Ibid.*

[redacted]

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When an unidentified unit was rumored to be behind the site's forward outposts, the Meo thought encirclement was under way. Several units panicked and abandoned Ban Mok Plai, leaving behind numerous weapons and supplies. The retreating troops were ambushed on the way back to Nam Bac, the final toll showing forty-three Meo killed and sixty-four wounded. To head off the capture of Nam Bac, the FAR quickly airlifted a GM 17 battalion from Paksane; and the northern campaign ended in a draw.[102]

Having forced the RLG to abandon its offensive in Luang Prabang Province, the NVA tried once more to capture Nong Khang (Lima Site 52). Since the earlier attack on January 22, many reports depicted enemy buildups in the area. The bad weather of February and March had precluded air raids on these concentrations, and the NVA action on the night of April 3/4 was no surprise.[103]

At first the Meo defenders held on, but the bad weather, haze, and smoke prevented resupply and close air support. By the afternoon of April 4, the defenders ran low on ammunition and withdrew to the southwest. As at Ban Mok Plai, the communists left a single escape route open and set up a number of ambushes along the way. Demoralized by this tactic, the Meo soldiers chose to leave the area instead of regrouping as guerrillas. The loss of Lima Site 52 dealt a sharp blow to Vang Pao, diluting his harassment and intelligence capabilities in the Samneua area.[104]

Even with this setback, the Meo general decided to attack Chik Mok Lok, a four thousand-foot hill overlooking the nearby town of Muong Peun and Route 6. An assault of the hill on March 15 had failed when the North Vietnamese counterattacked and drove the Meo off the summit. On March 28 and 29 attempts were made—the latter time with A–1 support—but each fell short. The Meo tried again on April 9, bolstered by twelve A–1Es and ten F–105s dispensing napalm and antipersonnel bomblets. By noon, they had reached the summit after bitter hand-to-hand fighting. The communists fled down the hill but began lobbing mortar rounds on the tribesmen that afternoon. Air strikes destroyed two 82-mm mortars, but the Meo commander was wounded by the shelling. The NVA counterattacked; and the Meo gave up the hill, moving back to Phou Phathi by March 10. Both sides had about twenty dead.[105]

Indications had appeared that the North Vietnamese might be planning to attack the neutralists at Muong Soui. Between March 27 and April 4, roadwatch teams detected more than 820 trucks westbound on Route 7 from North Vietnam, compared to an average of 30 trucks a day moving over this road. The Americans believed the vehicles were swiftly dispersing into the numerous and often hidden truck parks and depots off the road and in the Plain of Jars. Additionally, vehicle traffic from Ban Ban to Khangkhai had risen in March to an average of 20 a day, with 16 a day the average for the same month in 1966. A high-ranking Laotian officer, present at an April 7 meeting at Muong Soui between Souvanna and neutralist officers, reported the prime minister was about to ask Sullivan to loose an all-out air campaign against these truck parks. However, the chances were slim that such an air effort could succeed. Severe smoke and haze during the first week of April had held down air support for Nong Khang, and the lima site had been lost. Prospects were dim, but the enemy did not attack, as an unseasonable outbreak of rain temporarily halted operations. When the weather cleared in the last week of April, the communists had already chosen to terminate the dry-season campaign.[106]

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102. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 255, 250600Z Mar 67, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 250330Z Mar 67.
103. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 295, 080535Z Apr 67; *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, Apr 67.
104. See note above.
105. Msgs, DOD/PRO to CINCPAC, 111630Z Apr 67, DIA to AIG 7011, 130510Z Apr 67.
106. Msgs, DIA to AIG 925, 062220Z Apr 67, CINCUSARPAC to CINCPAC, 080320Z Apr 67, DIA to AIG 925, 131030Z Apr 67, DOD/PRO to CINCPAC, 111648Z Apr 67, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, 295, 080535Z Apr 67.

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Chapter IX

The Wet Season Offensive Sputters: 1967 (U)

(U) The rainy season came late to Laos in 1967. After a false start in April, the rains began in earnest during July. Rain was as welcome to the communists as it was to the government forces, for both sides were exhausted from the bitter fighting of the recent campaign.

(U) The military outlook in Laos at the close of the dry season was about the same as at the beginning of the campaign. For the first time in years, the foe had failed to score a major victory or to seize any territory (except Nong Khang (Lima Site 52) and a few isolated lima sites). To be sure, the neutralists stayed at Muong Soui only because they had not been attacked. Elsewhere, however, the Royal Laotian Government had retained its salients at Nam Bac and Phou Phathi (Lima Site 85) and had actually extended its holdings around Lao Ngam in southern Laos. Although exposed and rather tenuously held, the three positions for the moment appeared secure.[1]

(U) One reason for the relative success of the government forces lay in the increased effectiveness of USAF air strikes. Air power had taken a greater toll of enemy trucks and had been the difference in the battle at Lima Site 36. This effectiveness was the result of improved intelligence from roadwatch teams, better exploitation of prisoner and refugee interrogation, more reliable air-ground communications, and the introduction of the A–26.[2] On the other hand, the North Vietnamese had stepped up their truck movements; and so far, air power had been able only to hamper them. To cut down on truck traffic, the Air Force was beefing up its strength in Thailand, but serious differences persisted over how these resources could best be employed. The Air Force wanted to concentrate on interdiction, while Ambassador Sullivan wanted more support for the Laotian ground forces.

(U) Laotian government troops had improved somewhat in fighting capabilities. The Meo was still the best fighting force, but the FAR was making slow progress. The high command continued to be riddled with corruption and deeply enmeshed in political machinations, and too many troops were tied down to static defenses. However, training and equipment had been improved, a group of young officers who rejected the "blockhouse mentality" began to emerge, and a long overdue reorganization of the armed forces was under way. The neutralist army, the FAN, was a mere shadow of its former self, but the ouster of Kong Le had paved the way for closer cooperation with the FAR, the right wing component of the Royal Laotian Army. The Royal Laotian Air Force had also begun to pull itself together in the aftermath of the Thao Ma coup and had performed well during the fighting around Nam Bac.

(U) The fall of Thao Ma and Kong Le had removed disruptive elements from the political scene, and the elections in January 1967 further strengthened Souvanna's hand. In the wake of these elections, the principal political events centered around the issue of a successor to Souvanna should he decide to step down. The generals continued to maneuver for control of the armed forces but seemed to have settled into a semblance of stability. Essentially, each of the principal commanders recognized the ambitions of the others and moved to subvert them. Each sought to sidestep a showdown (either verbally or with arms) and refrained from direct interference in the

1. (U) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 180033Z Jul 67, subj: Dry Season Wrap-up.
2. (U) *Ibid.*

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illicit activities of the others. Now and then they would work together to eliminate a common rival (such as Thao Ma or Kong Le) or to block one of their number who was becoming too powerful.[3]

The composition of U.S. aircraft deployed to Thailand changed markedly in 1967. Early in the year, the Air Force had a total of 459 aircraft at seven bases in Thailand. The main mission of these aircraft was to conduct operations in North Vietnam and Steel Tiger, but they also furnished the bulk of U.S. air support in Barrel Roll. Consequently, any change in this posture inevitably affected the campaign in northern Laos. In February, Washington notified PACAF that ten F–4D squadrons would be available for the Pacific theater. (The F–4D was more flexible than either the F–4C or the F–105—it exceeded the F–4C in air-to-air capability and surpassed the F–105 in bomb-carrying capacity.) Four of these F–4D units were earmarked for Southeast Asia—three in Thailand and one in South Vietnam.[4]

Gen. John D. Ryan, CINCPACAF, was pleased with this news, but he wanted to deploy all ten squadrons to Southeast Asia—seven to Thailand and three to South Vietnam. Under the PACAF plan, one squadron would replace the F–104s at Udorn, three would replace the F–105s at Takhli, and three would replace the F–4Cs at Ubon. The other three squadrons would replace a like number of F–4Cs at Da Nang in South Vietnam. This would do away with the problems of maintaining two different types of jet fighters at any of the bases.[5]

Washington's plan was finally approved after lengthy discussion, even though it entailed shifting units between bases. The 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Ubon (with F–4Cs) received F–4Ds in May. Two months later, the 435th Tactical Fighter Squadron moved from Udorn to Ubon and exchanged F–104s for the newer aircraft. To make room for the 435th, the EC–121 aircraft were sent first to Udorn, then to Korat, where they dislodged the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron in October. The 13th went to Udorn and traded its F–105s for F–4Ds.[6]

The move of the 13th to Udorn was noteworthy because it meant that jet aircraft, for the first time, could strike in northern Laos without refueling. It was also the first time that a fighter squadron was assigned to a reconnaissance wing. Although a departure from Air Force policy, this arrangement eased the flow of information between reconnaissance and fighter crews.

The introduction of the F–4Ds was not without its problems. Crews from the United States accompanied the new aircraft, and the wholesale exchange of squadrons resulted in a sharp loss of combat-experienced crews. The new crews quickly acquired the requisite combat experience, but the temporary decrease in effectiveness fueled a growing controversy between prop planes and jets. In October, the 1st Air Commando Squadron (ACS), with nineteen A–1s and combat-experienced crews, moved from South Vietnam to Nakhon Phanom. The Seventh Air Force had intended to use the prop-driven A–1s to drop electronic sensors in Steel Tiger to monitor truck traffic, but the Skyraiders proved unsuited to the task. This job was given to the jets that could better survive the heavier antiaircraft fire along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The A–1s then joined the 602d ACS at Udorn, flying interdiction and close support in the more lightly defended areas of Laos. (This strengthening of USAF air power in Thailand did not escape the keen eye of Ambassador Sullivan, who was determined to get his "fair share" for northern Laos.) In October 1967, the 14th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (RF–4Cs) replaced the RF–101s at Udorn, giving the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing two squadrons of RF–4Cs and one fighter squadron of F–4Ds.[7]

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3. Msgs, CAS FIRs, 121200Z Mar 67, 041445Z Oct 67.
4. Hist, PACAF, Jan 1–Dec 31, 1967, pp 27–28.
5. Msg, CINCPACAF to CSAF, 222344Z, subj: F–4C Replacements with F–4D.
6. Hist, PACAF, Jan 1–Dec 31, 1967, pp 28–31.
7. 7th AF Comd Status Rprt, Dec 31, 1967; EOTR, Col Victor N. Cabas, Comdr, 432 TRW (Sep 19, 1967–Sep 3, 1968), Sep 5, 1968, p 6.

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The Wet Season Offensive Sputters: 1967

(U) In early 1967, EC–130s out of Da Nang Air Base provided ABCCC coverage for Steel Tiger while three RC–47s served similar duty in Barrel Roll; but the RC–47 operation had never been totally satisfactory. Initially intended as radio relay points for CIA roadwatch teams, these planes had been pressed into service as airborne command posts during 1966. The absence of oxygen equipment limited the aircraft to relatively low altitudes, hampering their communication capabilities over long distances. Low speed and modest power rendered them vulnerable if they ventured into the heavily defended areas where most strikes took place, and they had neither proper radio equipment nor sufficient space for the controllers. In April 1967, an EC–130 based in Da Nang took over the daytime orbit in Barrel Roll; and in June, three EC–130s were assigned to Udorn and the RC–47s returned to their radio relay role. A Viet Cong rocket attack on Da Nang in July caused Seventh Air Force to put the remaining four EC–130s at Udorn. To make room for them, the search and rescue HC–130s were moved from Udorn to Tuy Hoa, South Vietnam. The move of the ABCCC operation to Udorn was seen as a temporary one (until the security of Da Nang could be assured), but the EC–130s were destined to stay at Udorn for the rest of the war.[8]

(U) Other changes dealt with helicopters and observation aircraft. Apart from search and rescue, the primary helicopter support for northern Laos came from twelve H–34s of Air America and five CH–3 Pony Express helicopters of the 20th Helicopter Squadron operating out of Udorn. To augment this force, the 21st Helicopter Squadron with six CH–3s was dispatched to Nakhon Phanom in late 1967. The 21st was originally intended to support the sensor fields being set up in Steel Tiger. This mission soon proved too hazardous, and the unit joined the Pony Express [redacted]

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(S) The principal forward air control aircraft for Laos was the O–1; twenty-two of these planes were assigned to the 23d Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS) at Nakhon Phanom.[10] Besides controlling USAF strikes in southern Laos, the planes and pilots of the 23d occasionally bolstered the air attaché's Butterfly FAC network in northern Laos. In February 1967, the Air Force decided to replace these aircraft with the faster twin-engine O–2. Thirty O–2s were scheduled to be delivered during June, July, and August; and the O–1 pilots were scheduled to convert to the newer aircraft "in place." A few O–1s were to remain at Nakhon Phanom until the end of the year for pilots whose remaining tour was too brief to warrant checkout in the O–2.[11] However, aircraft deliveries fell behind; and by the end of end of the year, the 23d TASS was still operating a mix of O–1s and O–2s, with the remaining O–2s due for delivery in early 1968.[12]

(S) While the O–2 improved effectiveness of the FAC's, it complicated the picture for Colonel Pettigrew, air attaché at Vientiane. It was fairly easy to disguise the O–1s as Laotian aircraft since the RLAF possessed some of them. This was not true for the O–2, and Pettigrew searched for a new way to meet his FAC needs.

(S) On a visit to Nakhon Phanom in March 1967, General Momyer was briefed on the Butterfly program. He was shocked to hear that enlisted men and nonrated officers controlled air strikes since Air Force policy required all forward air controllers to be seasoned jet fighters who had completed a course in FAC procedures. A shortage of qualified jet fighter pilots in Vietnam had already forced the Air Force to compromise this policy and allow nonfighter pilots to become forward air controllers. This moved the Army to question the quality of air support it could get

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8. (S) Cabas EOTR, pp 12–14. For a more detailed discussion of ABCCC operations, see Maj Robert M. Burch, *The ABCCC in SEA* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1969).
9. (S) Capt Edward Vallentiny, *USAF Posture in Thailand, January-December 1967* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1969), pp 39–41. See also Capt Donald W. Nelson, *The USAF Helicopter in SEA* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, 1968).
10. (U) Under certain conditions A–1s, A–26s, and C–123s could also serve as FACs.
11. (S) Msg, CINCPACAF to 7th AF/13th AF, 212125Z Feb 67, subj: Deployment of O–2 Aircraft.
12. (S) 7th AF Comd Status Rprt, Dec 31, 1967; Cabas EOTR, p 6.

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from the Air Force, and General Momyer had just assured General Westmoreland that all FACs assigned to U.S. Army units would be jet fighter pilots. The nonfighter pilots in Vietnam would be confined to controlling aircraft engaged in interdiction or support of Vietnamese forces. In spite of the proven success of the Butterfly program, General Momyer directed that the Butterfly program be discontinued. The continued use of nonrated and enlisted FACs would have given the appearance that the Air Force was further diluting its standards and would have strengthened the Army's case for establishing its own forward air controllers.

Colonel Pettigrew protested that the program had grown out of a need for a strike control system, and the increased use of jet fighters in northern Laos dictated the continuation of a viable FAC program. General Momyer agreed and ordered the 23d TASS to supply six FACs for ninety days while a permanent solution was sought. The permanent solution proved elusive, and the squadron furnished FACs on successive ninety-day rotations for the next year.[13]

As the new program gathered momentum, Pettigrew felt a new name was in order; and in September 1967, the Butterflies became Ravens. However, the conversion to O–2 aircraft forced the 23d TASS to advise, on October 31, that its support for the Raven program would have to end. This prompted Pettigrew to request that CINCPAC have the 504th Tactical Air Support Group (the parent unit of the 23d) support Raven permanently. The issue lingered in limbo until the following March, and the dwindling pool of O–1 pilots at Nakhon Phanom continued to operate the FAC network in northern Laos.[14]

When the rains began in mid-1967, the country team had grounds for cautious optimism. The government forces outnumbered the enemy and had come through the dry season without a major defeat, the CIA had expanded its intelligence network to the north and east, the recent elections promised a degree of political stability, and the USAF buildup in Thailand suggested that more sorties might be available for Barrel Roll operations. Although Ambassador Sullivan warned that "the costly war of attrition in Laos is far from over," he felt that perhaps a turning point had been reached and that it was time for the allies to seize the initiative.[15]

Souvanna had said as early as April 7 that it would be perfectly legal for the neutralists to retake the Plain of Jars since they had held it at the time of the 1962 Geneva accords.[16] General Ouane was even more specific on April 26—he wanted to occupy Muong Sai during the rainy season to widen the salient at Nam Bac and give Luang Prabang greater protection. He then planned for combined air and ground operations to cut the main enemy supply lines into northern Laos—Route 19 from Dien Bien Phu towards Nam Bac, Route 6 from Samneua to Na Khang, and Route 7 from the "fish's mouth"[17] to Ban Ban. With these objectives secure, Ouane wanted "massive American airstrikes" to destroy enemy armor on the Plain of Jars and permit a combined Meo/neutralist force to retake the area. The FAR would then occupy the hills north and east of the plain to protect refugees (mostly lowland Lao) who would be resettled on the plain.[18]

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13. Intvw, Capt Henry S. Shields, Proj CHECO hist, with Col Harry C. Aderholt, Comdr 56th SOW, Col Paul A. Pettigrew, AIRA Vientiane, and Lt Col Jerome W. Klingaman, AOC Vientiane, Jan 7, 1972; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969. See also Capt Henry S. Shields, *USAF Control of Airstrikes in Support of Indigenous Lao Ground Forces* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1972), and Lt Col Ralph A. Rowley, *FAC Operations, 1965–1970* [The Air Force in Southeast Asia] (Washington, 1975). (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

14. See note above; memo, Col Paul A. Pettigrew, AIRA Vientiane, to [redacted] subj: Recommendation FAC Mission, Sep 18, 1967; msgs, 504th TASG to 7th AF, 311030Z Sep 67, subj: TDY FACs and O–1 Aircraft, AIRA to CINCPAC, 220530Z Nov 67, subj: FAC Support.

15. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 180033Z Jul 67, COMUSMACV (Gen Westmoreland) to CINCPAC (Adm Sharp), 281327Z May 67, subj: Udorn Conference.

16. Msg, DOD/PRO to CINCPAC, 111648Z Apr 67.

17. The area on the eastern border of Laos near Barthelemy Pass on Route 7 where North Vietnam juts sharply into Laos. (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

18. Msg, [redacted] subj: FAR Plans for Operations in Northern Laos during the Coming Rainy Season, Apr 27, 1967.

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This was a very ambitious plan and projected the FAR into a traditional Meo stronghold. It was also typical that Ouane's plan called for the Meo and neutralists to do most of the fighting while the FAR reaped the benefits. General Vang Pao was not enthusiastic about either prospect. He had consistently resisted efforts by the Laotian General Staff to extend its influence into Military Region II or to gain control over his guerrilla forces.[19] Vang Pao's own plans were far less ambitious. He intended to reoccupy the lost lima sites and await developments while continuing to harass the enemy's lines of communication.[20] Farther to the south, General Bounpone in Military Region III planned to secure Route 13 by eliminating the communist forces south of Thakhet. At the same time, General Phasouk in Military Region IV expected to push out from Lao Ngam to relieve pressure on Saravane and Attopeu.[21]

The view was more restrained inside the embassy. The country team recognized the need to expand government holdings but doubted if the government forces could carry out anything as ambitious as Ouane's plan—even with increased air support. The ambassador deemed it unwise to undertake any venture that would deepen U.S. involvement in the war or provoke a strong communist reaction. The embassy favored a more modest plan to seize key terrain features that would add depth and control the approaches to government held territory. Even this would hinge to a great extent on the air support available from the RLAF and the USAF.[22]

Despite these optimistic projections of early summer, none of the planned offensives came to pass, the government forces satisfying themselves with minor probes and inconclusive skirmishes. This permitted the communists to consolidate their positions around Nam Bac and Lima Site 85, improve their logistic base, and even conduct limited operations of their own. The first of these occurred during the predawn hours of July 16 when a twelve-man sapper team penetrated the Luang Prabang airfield. Working swiftly and efficiently, the raiders used hand grenades and satchel charges to destroy nine of the eleven RLAF T–28s parked on the field. Another T–28 was damaged, a helicopter and part of the bomb dump destroyed, and the operations building damaged. Three FAR soldiers were killed and eight injured, and the raiders withdrew without the base defenders seeing them.[23]

This second attack in six months was in some ways a testimony to the effectiveness of the RLAF. It suggested that the new fighter squadron was truly a thorn in the side of the communist forces around Nam Bac. The loss of nearly a quarter of its combat aircraft was of course a serious—although temporary—setback for the RLAF. Souvanna sacked Brig. Gen. Kane Insisiengmay, the Military Region I commander, for failing to tighten security after the earlier attack. However, since Kane was a nephew of Leuam Insisiengmay, deputy prime minister, he soon emerged as deputy commander in Military Region IV under General Phasouk. Kane's replacement in Luang Prabang was Brig. Gen. Tiao Sayavong, who happened to be a half brother to the king.[24] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

As soon as the wreckage was cleared, the Laotian squadron flew its remaining T–28 two and even three times a day. The [ ] pilots did what they could to fill the gap while continuing to support Vang Pao. The communists took advantage of the reduced sorties to bring in reinforcements (including three North Vietnamese battalions) and begin a piecemeal attrition of

19. The previous year, the General Staff had announced plans to assign a number of Laotian officers to Vang Pao's staff at Long Tieng, but the Meo general had refused to let the officers take their posts. (b)(1)
20. Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, subj: 21st Joint Weekly Recommendation, date indistinct [ca Jul 67]. (b)(3)
21. Msg, [ ] subj: FAR Plans for Operations in Northern Laos during the Coming Rainy Season, Apr 27, 1967. (S)
22. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 180033Z Jul 67; memo, AmEmb Vientiane, subj: U.S. Policy with Respect to North Laos, Nov 14, 1967, pp 6–10.
23. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 160645Z Jul 67.
24. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220430Z Jul 67.

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the garrison of Nam Bac.[25] Ambassador Sullivan assured Phouma that replacement planes would be furnished from Military Assistance Program assets. The ambassador insisted the aircraft stay at Vientiane overnight, staging out of Luang Prabang during the day until airfield security was adequate.[26] The replacement planes arrived at a rate of three a month; and the Luang Prabang squadron was back to full strength by October. The rains had ceased by then, and every available aircraft was needed to save Nam Bac.

In Military Region II, things were only slightly better. During the last week of July, Vang Pao got off a weak offensive that was abruptly stopped by the sudden appearance of two North Vietnamese Army battalions. This was a rude surprise for the Meo, for NVA units generally withdrew during the wet season, leaving just advisors and cadre personnel to buttress the Pathet Lao. That they were able to remain in Laos during the rainy season boded ill for the forthcoming dry season.[27]

The following week, a more successful operation was launched when four Pathet Lao defectors reported that the Muong Ngan Valley had been virtually abandoned by the communists. Vang Pao moved into the valley and surrounding hilltops at once, using the defectors to direct air strikes against their former comrades. This action netted the richest valley in northern Laos and secured its rice harvest for the government.[28]

While the government forces marked time, the only significant military action was the comic opera "Opium War." This erupted when a group of Burmese bandits tried to get their opium caravan through northern Thailand without paying the accustomed tribute to the local Chinese renegades.[29] Finding their way blocked by the Chinese, the Burmese crossed into Laos near the village of Ban Kueung on July 26, 1967, and took up positions around a sawmill belonging to General Ouane. The Burmese contacted Ouane and offered to sell him the opium. Before the negotiations could be completed, the Chinese crossed into Laos, surrounded the Burmese, and demanded the surrender of the opium. Ouane ordered both sides to get out of Laos leaving their arms and opium behind. The Burmese were willing but wanted payment for their opium. The Chinese refused outright unless they got the arms and opium as well as twenty-five hundred dollars from the Laotians. At this point, Ouane played the part of the outraged defender of his nation's honor. On July 30, at about noon, six T–28s swept up the Mekong River to bomb and strafe the Burmese and Chinese. While the planes wreaked havoc among the intruders, two infantry battalions took up blocking positions north of the village and another advanced from the south. General Ouane assumed personal command of the operation, bringing in reinforcements from as far away as southern Laos. Even the minuscule navy was ordered into action. The ensuing battle lasted two days, with the outcome never in doubt. Field reports revealed that over two hundred of the intruders were killed during the fighting and another one hundred drowned trying to cross the Mekong. Laotian casualties totaled only two killed and four wounded, but Ouane's sawmill was burned to the ground.

The loss of the sawmill was more than offset by the capture of the intruders' weapons and sixteen tons of raw opium left behind by the Burmese. Ouane shared the proceeds from the sale of this opium with those who had fought at Ban Kueung. One source said each man was able to buy a house in Vientiane with his share. For his determined action against the intruders, Ouane was awarded the Order of the Million Elephants and White Parasol.[30]

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25. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 190845Z Aug 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 32–67.
26. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 170430Z Jul 67.
27. Weekly Laotian SITREP, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 26–Aug 2, 1967.
28. Weekly Laotian SITREP, 7th AF/13th AF, Aug 2–Aug 9, 1967.
29. The Chinese were remnants of the nationalist forces that had retreated from China in 1949. They survived in Thailand by opium smuggling and preying upon local merchants.
30. Msgs, [redacted] Aug 67, 041610Z Aug 67, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 070404Z

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While Ouane was looking after his opium interests, the situation at Nam Bac was becoming more chaotic each day. To beef up the defenses and prepare for the long-awaited offensive, the General Staff sent twelve battalions to Nam Bac, enlarging the garrison to over forty-five hundred men. The idea was to concentrate a strong force at Nam Bac, then strike out to the east to link up with Vang Pao's forces advancing from the west. This would seal off the Ou River valley from the north and permit the FAR to sweep down the valley toward Luang Prabang, thus securing the approaches to the royal capital.[31]

Colonel Pettigrew, air attaché, thought the plan "reckless" and "very tempting" to the enemy, reminiscent of the kind of thinking that preceded the fall of Nam Tha in 1962. With no overall commander of the operation, each battalion reported separately to Tactical Headquarters, North Laos. The resulting probes, uncoordinated with air strikes and often beyond the range of supporting artillery fire, produced only friendly casualties. Nam Bac had no overall defense plan, patrolling was inadequate, and many of the troops from southern Laos were unhappy about being sent to fight in the north. Finally, an impossible demand on goods existed because of the new troops and the several thousand refugees from the surrounding area. The local merchants were quick to exploit the situation, and it was widely believed the high command was receiving kickbacks. As one Laotian pilot put it, "the cost of living is very high and the profits go to Tactique Nord."[32]

Despite these problems, Col. Bounchanh Savadphayphane (Chief of Staff, Tactical Headquarters, North Laos) resolved to carry out the operation. However, the first of a series of delays occurred almost at once. Bad weather prevented aerial resupply (the roads back to Luang Prabang were insecure); and when the weather eleared, morale and maintenance problems caused a virtual collapse of the RLAF helicopter operations that carried most of the supplies. This led to charges that the RLAF was "malingering," since it could fly but two missions a day compared with ten or twelve for Air America. However, Colonel Pettigrew felt the blame lay elsewhere.

> The fault really rests with TAC North which has failed to brief green pilots on the vagaries of landing and operating in the rugged Nam Bac area and on a maintenance system which places priority on development of a Lao maintenance capability—a worthy objective but one which in this case is in opposition to operational necessity in that three of the birds had only six hours flying time left on arrival Luang Prabang. Following the "Lao do it" maintenance system, the birds must return to Savannakhet where Lao maintenance shops are instead of staying in Luang Prabang where Air America support can be provided.[33]

On August 31, the FAR suffered a further setback when a T–28 mistakenly bombed a friendly position. The government troops fled back toward Nam Bac, leaving a gap in the defensive perimeter. At first, the communists made no attempt to exploit matters; but when the FAR failed to reoccupy the position, the Pathet Lao moved in to take over by default. Subsequent efforts to dislodge them were unsuccessful, rendering the whole situation at Nam Bac hopeless, although neither side appeared to realize it at the time.[34]

On September 24, Souvanna turned to the embassy for suggestions. He also asked for an increase in arms delivery and the assistance of a "senior army officer" at Tactical Headquarters, North Laos. This task fell to the assistant Army attaché in Luang Prabang, a major whose junior rank precluded his wielding much influence. The one available Air Force advisor was Maj. Karl

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Oct 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 40–67.

31. Weekly Laotian SITREPS, 7th AF/13th AF, Aug 7–Oct 31, 1967.
32. See note above; memo, AIRA Vientiane, subj: Conversation with Thongphanh, Aug 23, 1967.
33. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 261340Z Aug 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 33–67.
34. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 090500Z Sep 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 36–67.

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W. Leuschner, who was in charge of the air operations center at Luang Prabang, but he had no more success than his Army counterpart. Weapons deliveries were speeded up, and by end of the year all of the units in Nam Bac had been fully equipped.[35]

The embassy also recommended that the FAR abandon its offensive plans, go on the defensive, and release unneeded units for operations elsewhere. After a meeting on October 7, the Laotians accepted the American proposal. Colonel Bounchanh was ordered to take personal command at Nam Bac and to prepare plans for a static defense. At the same time, he was to conduct aggressive patrolling to gather intelligence for air strikes and to deter the enemy from massing for an attack. General Vang Pao agreed to deploy some of his forces westward to relieve pressure on Nam Bac, and the CIA assured the Laotians that its tribal guerrillas would continue to supply screening support. The country team felt if the General Staff implemented this plan promptly, there was no reason why Nam Bac could not be held against the communist forces, estimated at fifteen hundred men.[36]

The embassy likewise knew that to save Nam Bac would require a large measure of effective air support—both American and Laotian. Unfortunately, no tactical air control system existed in northern Laos to ensure that support. Requests for air support went from battalion to GM, to Tactical Headquarters, North, to RLAF headquarters in Vientiane, and finally to the air operations center at either Luang Prabang or Vientiane. Since the RLAF was under FAR control, it could not challenge the validity of these requests or develop its own targets.[37]

Like their American counterparts, Laotian pilots favored attacking fixed targets in lieu of "tree busting" for troops who were not engaging the enemy. Yet, most of the ground commanders liked to see the planes overhead and hear the comforting thud of bombs, even though they had no concept of proper targeting. According to Major Leuschner,

> The feeling appears to be that air power can work miracles in the battle for Nam Bac and the T–28s are still not being properly targeted. . . . attempts to remedy the situation have failed. The few times the O–1F has been utilized to check on suspected targets, the targets proved valueless.[38]

Regardless of these handicaps, the RLAF did what it could. For example, during the first week in October, the T–28s flew sixty-seven sorties against "suspected enemy troop concentrations." Target coverage was described as "excellent" although the jungle foliage ruled out accurate assessment, and patrols dispatched to the area could not measure results. This pattern recurred over the weeks that followed, always with reports of "excellent coverage" but scant concrete evidence to show other than an occasional secondary explosion.[39]

With the RLAF tied directly to Nam Bac, the communists could resupply and build up their forces at leisure. Only now and then did a USAF sortie disturb this activity (thirty-eight between October 15, 1967, and January 15, 1968). Most of these sorties were linked to CIA roadwatch teams, so targeting and bomb damage assessment were generally better than for the RLAF. Still, they were not good enough to convince the Seventh Air Force that a greater effort was justified. On October 16, for example, two F–105s struck a storage area on Route 19 and reported three secondary fires. Later the same day, eight A–1s hit a suspected troop concentration

35. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 301030Z Sep 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 38–67, 070404Z Oct 67; subj: Joint Operational Summary 40–67.
36. Msg, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 070404Z Oct 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 40–67.
37. Intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Karl W. Leuschner, Comdr, AOC, Luang Prabang, Jun 3, 1970.
38. Msg, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, 130230Z Jan 68.
39. See note 37.

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[redacted]

five miles south of Nam Bac with no observed results. On the 30th, eight F–105s returning from North Vietnam attacked a military complex. The pilots claimed twelve structures destroyed and fourteen secondary explosions. Two weeks later, four A–1s and four F–4s bombed a headquarters and bivouac area but reported just one secondary explosion. The communists continued to tighten the noose on Nam Bac; and by the close of the rainy season, the perimeter had shrunk to the village, the airfield, and a few of the surrounding hills. Everything else was in enemy hands.[40]

(U) In many respects, the problems of Nam Bac reflected those within the Laotian air force. After General Thao Ma departed, the RLAF drifted aimlessly in its day-to-day operations. Colonel Pettigrew, the air attaché, sized up the situation.

> The RLAF is divided into four basic groups which are mutually antagonistic: 1. The T–28 pilots who fight and die for their country; 2. the transport pilots who steal and traffic and make a great deal of money; 3. the base personnel who get next to nothing and resent it; 4. the General Staff . . . of the air force which merely jabbers and accomplishes nothing. Sourith has really not gotten hold of the problem and has not even begun to think of how to handle these four divergent forces and weld them into an organization which works. . . . [He] has certainly shown himself incapable of handling the RLAF.[41]

(U) In Pettigrew's eyes, one of Sourith's weaknesses was his selection of key subordinates.

> The RLAF Commander has established a policy of filling his general staff positions with officers of field grade rank replacing many of the company grade officers previously in the positions. Country team members view this policy with apprehension. Junior officers are mostly CONUS trained and familiar with MAP procedures. Senior officers are mostly French trained and not generally as knowledgeable. . . . Generally, the outlook is for the RLAF to operate more autonomously than ever with practically no central control.[42]

(U) As if organizational troubles were not enough, superstition plagued the air force. For example, a Laotian pilot grounded his aircraft on July 25 because it was possessed by an "evil spirit." The American maintenance men at Udorn checked the plane out and found no mechanical problem, but the pilot still refused to fly. At last the air commandos hit upon a solution—for some cigarettes, toothpaste, and soap they persuaded a Buddhist monk to exorcise the evil spirit. After the ceremony, the delighted pilot got back in the aircraft and flew it home. The total cost to the Americans was $7.62, a small price for the continued use of a $180,000 airplane.[43]

(U) While the Laotian army foundered at Nam Bac and the RLAF tried to pull itself together, the U.S. Air Force focused on disrupting the enemy's logistic network to forestall an early resumption of his offensive. Specific targets were selected at the weekly Udorn targeting meetings, the CIA nominating most of them. The targets were forwarded to the Seventh Air Force, which approved as many as possible, based on other priorities and commitments. For example, over the week of August 29 to September 4, the Udorn group nominated fifty-three fixed targets and nine road segments. The Seventh Air Force scheduled seven of the road segments and thirty-two of the fixed targets, including seventeen military complexes, five storage areas, five chokepoints, three truck parks, one bivouac area, and one transshipment point. An average of thirteen sorties were used each day to strike these targets—six for armed day reconnaissance, one for armed night reconnaissance, five for fixed targets, and one for close air support. In the same period, the RLAF flew an average of eighteen sorties per day, mostly close air support.[44]

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40. (U) *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, 109 vols (Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1965–1973), XXXIX, 2–5, XL, 2–3 thru 2–6.
41. (U) Memo, AIRA Vientiane, subj: Conversation with Thongphanh, Aug 23, 1967.
42. (U) Military Assistance Program Report (USAF) RCS: AF V–12, Oct 27, 1967.
43. (U) Military Assistance Program Report (USAF) RCS: AF V–12, Jul 25, 1967.
44. (U) Msg, 7th AF to CINCPAC, 191150Z Sep 67, subj: Status and Analysis Report, RT/BR/SL, Aug 28–Sep 17, 1967.

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Even though truck traffic was light during the rainy season, the need to keep the roads under constant surveillance resulted in the stress on armed reconnaissance. However, the strikes on fixed targets produced the most spectacular results. On July 30, two A–1s struck a storage area, leaving it engulfed in flame and smoke that rose three thousand feet, with secondary explosions that went on for more than an hour. Sometimes, A–1s would team up with F–105s (the A–1 acting as FAC) to hit a fixed target or to provide close air support. On July 29, eight A–1s and eight F–105s were called to repel an enemy attack on Na Khang (Lima Site 36); on August 21, six A–1s and six F–105s went to the aid of Vang Pao on the Plain of Jars; and on August 22, two A–1s and six F–105s struck a North Vietnamese probe at Phou Phathi (Lima Site 85). However, these operations were not all without opposition—the communists could be counted on to put up a spirited resistance to almost any strike from the impressive array of antiaircraft sites maintained around their fixed installations and along the major roads. Hits were fairly common, even though only one attack was actually driven off by antiaircraft fire and just two A–26s and a single A–1 were lost. Barrel Roll may have been a secondary theater for both the Air Force and the North Vietnamese, but it was still a very deadly game.[45]

Without a large-scale effort from the Laotian forces, the Air Forces concentrated on keeping pressure on enemy lines of communication. To increase this pressure, Operation Knight Watch began in late July 1967. The plan specified that A–1s be used to direct the entire North Vietnam strike package[46] against a single target in Barrel Roll when bad weather prevented strikes against the primary target in North Vietnam. The Seventh Air Force and the embassy approved the concept, and the main enemy headquarters complex near Samneua was chosen as the target.[47]

The Seventh Air Force command and control center in Saigon (Blue Chip) executed and directed the operations. When the launch of the scheduled sorties could not be justified because of bad weather forecast for North Vietnam, the Seventh Air Force alerted the strike force to the new mission. The code words "Knight Watch Alpha" or "Knight Watch Bravo" were transmitted for a morning or afternoon mission, respectively, along with an adjusted time over target. After receiving the code word, the 602d ACS dispatched eight A–1s. Armament was at the discretion of the individual pilots, but usually included a mixed load of marking rockets, general purpose bombs, white phosphorous bombs, and cluster bombs. After a prestrike refueling, the aircraft flew to a designated holding point and contacted the ABCCC for transfer to the forward air controller. While four of the A–1s set up a rescue orbit, two others controlled the incoming fighters, and the last two made the final target selection, marked the target, and controlled the actual strikes. Aircraft with ordnance remaining after the raid were free to conduct armed reconnaissance along Route 7 or to strike any validated target while under the control of a FAC.[48]

The first Knight Watch mission was flown on the afternoon of July 30 when forty-seven aircraft (F–4s and F–105s) struck the headquarters complex. Extremely heavy 37-mm and 57-mm antiaircraft fire forced the A–1s to modify their usual tactics. By using double roll-ins, simultaneous marking, firing from twice the normal range, and jinking, they avoided battle damage and accurately marked the target.[49] Poststrike results were not immediately available, but both the

45. Weekly Activity Reports, 56th ACW, Jul 1–Sep 30, 1967.

46. A strike package usually included sixteen F–105s loaded with bombs. Four to eight F–4s provided fighter escort, while another four to eight F–105 Iron Hand aircraft were assigned to suppress antiaircraft defenses. (Iron Hand aircraft were F–105s specially equipped for SAM and AAA suppression.) Two to four EB–66s normally accompanied the strike to jam enemy radar and occasionally to serve as Pathfinders (aircraft with LORAN) for the bombers. Supporting the entire package were an array of tankers to provide aerial refueling, EC–121s to afford early warning of enemy MiGs, prestrike and poststrike photo reconnaissance aircraft, and a variety of search and rescue aircraft.

47. Hist, 56th ACW, Jul–Sep 67, p 8.

48. Msgs, 7th AF to all Bravo addressees, 260910Z Jul 67, subj: Operation Knight Watch, 7th AF to 7th AF/13th AF, 070955Z Aug 67, subj: Knight Watch Armed Recce.

49. Weekly Activity Report, 56th ACW, Aug 4, 1967.

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embassy and the Seventh Air Force felt continuing the program was worthwhile. Even though the bomb damage assessment confirmed this impression, a month passed before weather conditions permitted the next Knight Watch strike.[50] Between August 30 and September 1, with three days of bad weather over North Vietnam, more than two hundred aircraft flew against the complex. On the August 31 mission, Maj. Robert P. Gould of the 602d ACS employed a new marking technique—dropping a string of white phosphorous bombs to mark a line toward the target. Antiaircraft fire was again intense but sheer numbers ultimately overwhelmed it.[51]

The communists had a two-week respite before forty fighters returned on September 18. This time, the enemy directed most of the antiaircraft fire at the A–1s, apparently figuring out which planes were controlling the missions. The final mission of the series took place three days later, when fifty aircraft hit the site, touching off ten secondary explosions and a fireball two hundred feet high. After this, the target complex had no residual military value and was deleted from the list of active targets. Against no losses, the Air Force was credited with destroying sixty 57-mm and seventy-one 37-mm antiaircraft guns, fifty-six trucks, four storage depots, two POL farms, two ammunition depots, two caves, and five buildings. Over eighteen hundred communists were killed, including three battalion commanders.[52] The commander of the 602d ACS said a great deal of the success of Operation Knight Watch was due to the maintenance crews, who responded to frequent changes in takeoff times and ordnance loads.

> The hard back-breaking work done without error while attempting to meet pushed TOTs [times over target] coupled with efforts to satisfy the individual armament load desires of the pilots speaks for itself.[53]

Pleased with the success of the first series of Knight Watch missions, Headquarters Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force on October 16 proposed a followup program. Under the new plan, the headquarters would nominate a single lucrative target in each of the three Barrel Roll sectors. The A–1 crews would be briefed in detail on these targets, and constantly updated target folders would be kept.[54] However, the rains had ended, USAF attention shifted back to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the most successful air operation to that time was never renewed.

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50. On August 25, a Knight Watch mission was scheduled and took off. However, because of poor weather in the target area, all but eight sorties were diverted to other targets.
51. Weekly Activity Report, 56th ACW, Sep 6, 1967.
52. Hist, 56th ACW, Jul-Sep 67, pp 10–11.
53. *Ibid*, p 10.
54. Msgs, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, subj: Knight Watch, Oct 16, 1967; memo, Maj Allison to Dir/Ops, 7th AF, subj: Knight Watch Frag, n.d. [ca Oct 67].

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Chapter X

The Enemy Advances and the Embassy Wants an Air Force (U)

(S) By October 1967, the rain had ended and the roads throughout Laos began to dry. Government prospects that looked so bright in the wet season now seemed dark. Except for General Vang Pao's success at Muang Ngan, the government had very little to show for its effort; and in some areas, notably Nam Bac, its position had deteriorated. This was due in part to the unusually short and light rainy season that had enabled the enemy to maintain stronger forward positions than before. However, vacillation and dissension within the government ranks hamstrung any meaningful action.

(S) As the rains diminished, heavy road construction began on all of the major communist lines of communication; and [redacted] adwatch teams reported more heavy equipment than had ever been seen in Laos. Especially threatening was the progress along Route 19 leading toward Nam Bac and on Route 6 in the vicinity of Phou Phathi. With that level of activity, the Seventh Air Force estimated that the North Vietnamese could start their resupply effort by November.[1] (b)(1)

(S) To meet this threat, Ambassador Sullivan, Generals Westmoreland and Momyer, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Philip C. Habib met at Udorn on October 21. The conferees settled on a Seventh Air Force plan for a three-phase air campaign focusing on Steel Tiger. During Phase I, the Air Force would concentrate on enemy supplies stockpiled near the passes leading into Laos. Then, as the North Vietnamese began moving this materiél down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the action would shift to harassment of trucks using the network. Last, the attacks would center on the passes leading into South Vietnam.

(S) In various forms, this pattern was destined to be the basis for Commando Hunt interdiction campaigns over the next several years. The objective of each was to reduce the flow of North Vietnamese men and supplies into the south. To do this, Seventh Air Force planned to use about 170 fighter sorties a day. Twenty-four (fourteen percent) were to be flown in northern Laos, half against fixed targets and half on armed reconnaissance missions.

(S) Air support for Laotian ground operations had been piecemeal, and the Seventh Air Force plan also provided for the first systematic support for ground operations in northern Laos. A Seventh Air Force operation order specified that

> the Royal Laotian Government ground forces will be provided with close air support on a recurring basis. [redacted] American Air Attaché (AIRA), Vientiane, and 7/13AF will provide coordination for these operations.[2] (b)(1)

Unfortunately, the term "recurring basis" was not clearly defined and the mechanism to achieve the coordination envisioned in the plan did not exist.

(S) The weekly Udorn targeting meetings dealt primarily with interdiction targets. Planning for ground operations was conducted separately by the Laotian General Staff, the regional military commanders [redacted] with coordination accomplished on an (b)(1)

1. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 2275, 220559Z Oct 67; 7th AF OpOrd 433–68, Sep 15, 1967.
2. (S) 7th AF OpOrd 433–68, Sep 15, 1967.

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ad hoc basis or—more commonly—not at all. Although many elements of a tactical air control system existed in Laos, they had never been integrated into a single system like the system that existed in South Vietnam. Instead, the Central Intelligence Agency, the air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force did their planning in isolation, without coordination and often in conflict with one another. The absence of coherent planning and coordination not only frustrated everyone involved, it also led to a waste of resources. As long as operations were limited and little support was required, this was not a serious problem. However, when air and ground operations expanded in 1968, it had severe consequences and became a major bone of contention between the embassy and the Air Force.

Part of the problem lay in the split responsibility between the Seventh Air Force and the embassy, but a larger part stemmed from the lack of overall policy guidance for the conduct of military operations in Laos. As late as 1970, an Air Staff analysis noted that "no administration has submitted a clearly defined policy on Laos."[3] In the absence of such guidance, policy was largely established by acceptance. That is, an agency would propose a course of action that, if approved, became accepted as part of the policy in Laos without reference to any wider consideration.[4]

When Ambassador Sullivan was appointed in 1964, he was told to "take charge" and set his own policy within broad guidelines established by Washington. In subsequent testimony before the Senate foreign relations committee, the ambassador claimed he could not recall receiving more than half a dozen instructions from the State Department in over four years in Laos.[5] The nature of the embassy further complicated his task—in spite of President Kennedy's "country team" directive, the embassy still consisted of a number of independent agencies, each doing its best to keep Laos afloat but each jealous of its own prerogatives and programs. This led an exasperated air attaché to complain "The country team in Laos is a facade. . . . It consists of a group of uncoordinated agencies each pursuing its own desires with little coordinating as a group."[6]

Recognizing that a common objective was not a common plan of action, the embassy in November 1967 developed a position paper to afford overall guidance to the various agencies by defining the limits of U.S. involvement.[7] The paper was titled "U.S. Policy with Respect to North Laos" and took note of Laotian ambitions. It concluded that American interests could best be served by "limited" military operations in which it could be shown that the war in Vietnam would be substantially helped; that the security of Thailand and territory held in North Laos would be significantly enhanced; or that relations with the Laotian Government would either be significantly enhanced with support of an operation or substantially deteriorated if expansion in North Laos were not supported.[8] The country team felt that most of the territory in enemy hands to be of slight economic or political worth and that recovery of this terrain would entail a greatly expanded AID program. On the other hand, the paper warned that "our imagination and alertness

3. Air Staff Comment on EOTR, Col Robert L. F. Tyrrell, AIRA Vientiane, Sep 22, 1970, p 25.
4. Blaufarb, p 98.
5. *Laos Hearings*, p 517. The ambassador was exaggerating. The authors found numerous instructions from the State Department, but they addressed specific issues and were at times contradictory. Thus the ambassador's point is well taken, if somewhat over drawn.
6. Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, p 16.
7. Internal evidence suggests that this paper was prompted by a dispute between the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States Agency for International Development over support of refugees and other AID projects, rather than by military necessity. However, just the military aspects of the paper are covered here.
8. Memo, AmEmb Vientiane, U.S. Policy with Respect to North Laos, Nov 28, 1967. The Royal Laotian Government's agreement to the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and using Laotian territory for navigation aids and helicopter staging bases to support the bombing in North Vietnam made both of these operations easier. Still, there is no indication that the United States would have terminated either activity merely to mollify Laotian objections.

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to opportunities . . . must not be dulled by penury."[9] In any event, the embassy believed political and military considerations would confine any friendly expansion to a line roughly connecting Muong Sing, Nam Bac, and Phou Phathi. Even this would depend largely on the level of U.S. air support and might be impossible if the North Vietnamese greatly enlarged their forces in northern Laos.[10]

(S) With the recognized weakness of the Laotian army and the onset of the dry season, the embassy plan would seem to have been overly ambitious. Indeed, the massive NVA intervention that the Americans feared was already under way, and the entire scheme would be overtaken by events before it could be implemented. Survival—not expansion—would be the issue by the end of the 1967–68 dry season.

(S) Even without North Vietnamese intervention, it seems doubtful that the paper would have served its original purpose. By the time it emerged from coordination, it was less of a directive than a philosophical treatise. The guidelines were so broad and specific criteria so conspicuously absent that each agency still had virtually a free hand to pursue its own programs, and the paper did not provide any new means to resolve differences among agencies.

(S) Yet, the paper stands as the only attempt in nearly two decades of U.S. involvement in Laos to set down a coherent policy. Its failure simply reflects the bureaucratic facts of life in Laos, not an absence of dedication on the part of the persons involved. In any event, "policy" in Laos was about to be hammered out on the battlefield and not in the embassy.

(S) By November, all the major roads in northern Laos were passable; and enemy traffic surged to new heights, with the heaviest reported on Route 7 leading to the Plain of Jars. This route accounted for 27 percent of all trucks seen in Laos over the dry season (7,084 of 26,281), but these figures must be viewed with caution.[11] As the most closely monitored highway in Laos, Route 7 was observed by roadwatch teams on all but one of the 183 days between October 1, 1967, and March 31, 1968. These teams maintained surveillance for an average of five hours during daylight and twelve hours at night. In contrast, Route 6 was monitored for 116 days (one hour during daylight and six hours at night), while Route 19 was covered on only 82 days, with an average of only two hours during the day and four hours at night. Multiple counting presented an additional problem. Since most of the traffic consisted of trucks shuttling between transshipment points, a truck was likely to be counted twice on each shuttle. Similarly, trucks passing two or more observation points were reported by each team. Aircraft and electronic sensors also furnished truck sightings, many duplicating the count of roadwatch teams. On the other hand, many trucks no doubt went undetected because none of the routes were constantly covered. Later attempts to refine the reporting and analysis only generated greater confusion and disagreement over numbers and their significance. While allowing for these vagaries, it was obvious to most American authorities that the North Vietnamese had embarked on a major resupply effort. The full significance of this effort, however, did not become clear until the Tet offensive of early 1968.

(S) As communist traffic increased, so did USAF sorties, with A–1s and F–105s flying the bulk (77 percent) of the missions. As specified in the October plan, about half of the 2,181 sorties between October and December 1967 were devoted to armed reconnaissance (1,140). Of the others, 954 were flown at fixed targets and 87 provided escort for search and rescue or infiltration/extraction of roadwatch teams.[12] Typically, two A–1s would depart from Udorn each morning to conduct armed reconnaissance. If no trucks were seen and they were not diverted to some other mission, the pilots were free to hit any validated target before returning to Udorn

9. (S) Memo, AmEmb Vientiane, U.S. Policy with Respect to North Laos, Nov 28, 1967.
10. (S) *Ibid.*
11. (S) *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XL–XLVI, Sec 2.
12. (S) *Ibid*, XXXIX–XLI, Sec 2.

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around noon. In the afternoon, a second pair of A–1s repeated this process. Weather, maintenance, and higher priority missions forced frequent changes in this pattern, eliciting a steady stream of protest from Ambassador Sullivan. Night operations were far more stable, with one or two A–26s patrolling the supply routes.

Aircraft returning from North Vietnam with unused ordnance (mainly F–105s and F–4s) would carry out armed reconnaissance or attack a fixed target if a forward air controller was available. Aircraft were occasionally diverted from Steel Tiger or other missions to strike in Barrel Roll, although the reverse was more common. As a result, the actual number of missions fluctuated widely from day to day, leading to frequent accusations that northern Laos was simply a dumping ground for sorties that could not find targets elsewhere. On November 7, for example, 124 planes struck targets in Barrel Roll; but between November 12 and 16, no sorties at all were flown in northern Laos.

During the last three months of 1967, 212 trucks were located (2.8 percent of the 7,367 reported by roadwatch teams) and 187 were attacked, with 27 destroyed and 13 damaged. Enemy reaction to these pinpricks was usually light and sporadic. Only thirteen percent of the missions came under fire, generally small arms and automatic weapons, but occasionally 23-mm or 37-mm. Several aircraft were hit, but none were lost to enemy ground fire.[13]

The limited results stemmed from several factors. First, the number of truck "sightings" (mainly by CIA roadwatch teams) must be viewed with suspicion due to inherent deficiencies in the reporting system. In addition, ninety-two percent of the traffic moved at night when only the A–26s were flying. The Air Force directed thirty-five percent of its strike sorties in Laos (mostly in Steel Tiger) against this predominate movement at night, producing a day rate of forty-six sorties for every five trucks and a night rate of two sorties per five trucks. However, most of the day sorties were devoted to fixed targets, road cuts, and seeding. The cumulative effect was to force the trucks off the roads during the day and into the waiting arms of the night hunters. Results were also hampered by the time needed for a plane to arrive after the sighting was reported—if a plane was even in the area. When the plane did arrive, it was one thing for a ground observer to see a truck and quite another for a pilot to spot the same truck from several thousand feet through a jungle canopy at night. (At the sound of approaching planes, the trucks turned off their lights and tried to pull off the road into the cover of trees. About the only chance for a pilot to see—much less attack—a truck was in the daytime when the vehicle was in an open area and the aircraft already near at hand.

Finally, the majority of Barrel Roll sorties were flown by jets diverted from North Vietnam. These planes were armed for strikes on fixed targets (with general purpose bombs) and not for armed reconnaissance (with cluster bomb units, napalm, and high-drag bombs). Furthermore, jet crews were oriented toward operations in a high-threat environment that required high-altitude delivery and were usually not as proficient in the low-level delivery techniques of armed reconnaissance and close air support. The A–1s and A–26s were configured for armed reconnaissance, their crews were more familiar with that type of operation, and the prop planes generally did better than the jets.

In Seventh Air Force eyes, these meager results were hardly worth the effort. Some aircrews considered being scheduled into Barrel Roll a form of administrative punishment. More spectacular and perhaps more significant achievements (including promotions and decorations) were to be had in Steel Tiger since South Vietnam—not northern Laos—was the principal theater. However, Ambassador Sullivan thought otherwise. While Seventh Air Force saw its role in Laos primarily as interdiction, the ambassador's foremost concern was close air support for the Meo. With the RLAF engrossed in the support of FAR operations, support for the Meo was left to the

13. *Ibid.*

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[redacted] sorties Sullivan could wring out of the Seventh Air Force. To him, armed reconnaissance was little more than an airborne alert that could be, and often was, diverted to support the Meo. Many times these diverts saved a friendly position or opened up an advance, although rarely was the outcome reported.

[redacted] This also explains in part the few night sorties in Barrel Roll (three percent versus thirty-five percent in Steel Tiger). Quite simply, the ambassador did not request more. Even then, he viewed the A–26s as night support for the isolated lima sites rather than as truck killers. Nevertheless, he was always careful to justify his request on the basis of truck kills because this was more likely to strike a responsive chord at the Seventh Air Force.

[redacted] Attacks on fixed targets were generally more successful than armed reconnaissance. The Seventh Air Force selected specific targets based on intelligence, priorities, and nominations from the Udorn targeting meetings. During November 1–15, for instance, twenty-eight targets were picked (ten supply/storage areas, eight military complexes, five interdiction points, three cave/storage sites, and two truck parks). Sorties against these targets averaged thirty-four a day.[14]

[redacted] As with armed reconnaissance, the actual sortie levels varied from day to day, but all twenty-eight targets were hit at least once, often with spectacular results. On November 4, for example, eight F–105s struck a troop concentration just east of the Plain of Jars. Poststrike photographs showed two hundred enemy killed by air. Later that same day, sixteen planes diverted from North Vietnam assaulted a nearby truck park and storage area. A ground observer reported another forty communists killed and all supplies destroyed.

[redacted] An even more successful raid resulted from the interrogation of an NVA prisoner who pinpointed the location of the 924th Engineer Regiment near the southern edge of the plain. Since the target was outside the normal Barrel Roll area, Ambassador Sullivan gave special permission for a single strike. Fifteen aircraft swept over the area on the morning of November 7 and the NVA position was engulfed in smoke and flame within minutes. Later reports revealed that the enemy unit had been severely mauled by this strike, apparently caught completely by surprise. The target was less than a mile from a heavy antiaircraft artillery concentration, but no aircraft were hit by the sporadic ground fire that was received only toward the end of the strike.

[redacted] Other major attacks took place on November 20, 22, and 30, when F–105s and A–1s added forty-three structures, nineteen secondary explosions, nine road cuts, and 150 troops to their score. The pace continued during December, with seven major raids on truck parks, storage areas, and military complexes. Enemy reaction to the attacks on fixed targets was more intense than to the armed reconnaissance missions (47 percent drew enemy fire), but again no aircraft were lost.[15]

[redacted] In fact, the only USAF loss occurred on December 5 when an F–105 pilot apparently lost control of his plane. According to the forward air controller

> Lead started his roll in with, what I thought, an unusually high G maneuver. . . . From my position it appeared that the aircraft rolled inverted then entered a seventy to eighty degree nose low spin. . . . From that point the aircraft continued to spin on down . . . to the ground with no visible attempt at spin recovery, no ordnance jettisoned and no visible attempt at ejection.[16]

The burning wreckage, including numerous secondary explosions, was strewn over an area about seventy-five yards in diameter. Rescue aircraft arrived within five minutes but, with no sign of

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14. [redacted] Msg 7th AF to CINCPAC, 111101Z Nov 67, subj: Status and Analysis Report, RT/BR/SL, Nov 1–15, 1967.
15. [redacted] *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XL, 2–4 thru 2–6.
16. [redacted] Ltr, James F. Lamon, Raven 49, to AIRA Vientiane, subj: Aircraft Accident, Wildcat Lead, Dec 7, 1967.

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life from the wreckage, the forward air controller moved off to direct the remaining fighters onto their target.

Aircrews operating in Barrel Roll faced hazards other than ground fire and aircraft accidents. On January 7, 1968, the first air-to-air engagement ensued when two MiG–21s jumped a pair of A–1s.[17] The A–1s were flying a search and rescue orbit just north of Samneua when the enemy planes attacked. One of the A–1s at once broke into the sun while the other dove for the ground. The MiGs chose to chase the latter aircraft, firing a missile that narrowly missed the violently maneuvering A–1. Several more passes were made but no more missiles were fired as the American dodged and jinked out of the way. The MiGs eventually gave up and returned to North Vietnam. The A–1s headed back to Udorn. As they checked out with the airborne battlefield command and control center, one of the controllers wished them a hearty "good day." One of the A–1 pilots replied, "It may have been good for you; it sure wasn't much fun for us."[18]

Although the USAF sorties were drawing blood, they did not seriously impede the enemy buildup. In particular, the situation around Nam Bac was becoming critical. Having failed to carry out their planned offensive, the Laotians sat huddled in the valley while the communists built their strength up around the perimeter, "preparing the battlefield" by whittling away at the defenders. Inside the perimeter were elements of GMs 11, 12, and 15 that totaled forty-five hundred men (the largest concentration of the war), supported by eight artillery pieces and ten T–28s stationed at Luang Prabang. Outside the perimeter, friendly guerrillas, mainly Yao and Lu tribesmen, furnished a screening force to harass the enemy and to collect intelligence.

Communist forces in the immediate vicinity numbered just fourteen hundred men. These consisted of a North Vietnamese Army battalion, two mixed NVA/PL battalions, and a single Pathet Lao battalion with North Vietnamese advisors. Three more NVA/PL battalions with twelve hundred men were within three days march, and three battalions from the NVA 335th Regiment at Dien Bien Phu were also available. A fourth communist battalion, located between Nam Tha and Muong Sai, was largely tied down by Lao-Theng guerrillas.

Despite an edge in numbers, the government forces were in a perilous position. With the communists controlling the roads between Nam Bac and Luang Prabang, the garrison's principal link with the outside world was a 2,600-foot dirt airstrip. As long as it stayed open, a trickle of supplies could reach the trapped garrison and the wounded could be evacuated. In spite of maintenance problems and harassment from enemy mortar fire, the RLAF C–47s and H–34s continued daily shuttles to Nam Bac, supplemented by an occasional Air America C–123.

Outside the perimeter, government guerrillas did what they could to slow the enemy buildup. Raids on Muong Sing (October 21), Nam Tha (December 24), and Muong Sai (January 10) were especially effective in drawing off communist forces. To the east, General Vang Pao began moving three hundred Meo toward Muong Ngoi on November 6. This force was within fifteen miles of its destination by the end of the month, when Vang Pao ordered a halt. Unless there was a corresponding thrust out of Nam Bac, he felt any further advance would bring a strong riposte from the enemy.

Inside Nam Bac, Colonel Bounchanh had not yet come up with an overall defense plan; and he would not sanction a breakout until he was sure the defenses were strong enough to be held by the troops left behind. With no coherent action by the FAR, the communists filtered into the valley; and a few small units actually set up positions inside the perimeter. Unless something were done quickly, the entire defensive position would crumble.[19]

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17. MiGs had been active briefly in Laos during early 1967, but no engagements had taken place.
18. Hist, 56th ACW, Jan–Mar 68, I, 32.
19. Msgs, JANAF Attachés Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, 210630Z Oct 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 41–67, 280830Z Oct 67, subj: Joint Operational Summary 42–67, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 131106Z Jan 68, subj: Nam Bac; Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968, pp 235–36.

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The Enemy Advances and the Embassy Wants an Air Force

Finally on December 15, the Laotian General Staff met with American officials to discuss plans for a breakout. They agreed that GM 15 would be lifted by helicopters to Muong Ngoi and connect with Vang Pao's troops. GM 12 would close the gap left by GM 15, and the remaining battalions would clean out the enemy pockets in the valley. Ostensibly, this plan would permit the FAR to hold Nam Bac while releasing GM 15 to act as a general reserve.[20] In fact, the FAR had decided to abandon Nam Bac—and the defenders knew it.

The breakout was set to begin on December 20, 1967, but on the twenty-second, Major Leuschner notified Colonel Pettigrew

> Col Bounchanh still apparently has no concrete plans for his part in the operation. I have continued [to try] to obtain specific information on what their airpower needs are and continue to receive no specific targeting information. Col Bounchanh will only say he wants air support, but he refuses to get specific on what targets he wants hit, when he wants them hit and how he intends to coordinate his ground movements with air support. I asked specifically if he wanted fighter cover in the area for the GM 15 movement and was told "No."[21]

Even without air support, the first part of the operation came off smoothly on December 23. In one of the most spectacular airlifts of the war, all 880 men of GM 15 were moved by RLAF and Air America helicopters to Muong Ngoi where they were joined by Vang Pao. The communists countered with a heavy mortar barrage on the airfield. The RLAF replied with a maximum effort (fourteen sorties with seven aircraft) against the suspected mortar positions.

Realizing they had been abandoned, the troops remaining inside the perimeter did not try to carry out their part of the plan. They simply retreated farther into the valley, allowing the foe's company-size units to slip through the gaps left by GM 15. Sensing it was time for the coup de grace, the North Vietnamese Army committed the 335th Regiment and ten battalions (four NVA, one PL, and five NVA/PL). These troops began to close in on the thirty-five hundred men trapped in the valley. Although the defenders still outnumbered their assailants, all cohesion was gone. Units milled about aimlessly, waiting for the inevitable end.[22]

Only Major Leuschner's T–28s and the helicopter supply stood in the way of the communist victory. During an inspection visit to the air operations center, General Ouane told Leuschner that the king had ordered Nam Bac "held at all cost" and that the RLAF was expected to do the job. Generals Sourith and Kouprasith also paid visits to the AOC. While the RLAF commander appeared more interested in parachute inspections than in operations, Kouprasith had the decency to give each of the pilots a bonus of thirty thousand kip (about sixty dollars).[23]

In the week following the airlift, the T–28s flew sixty-six sorties, dropped 131 500-pound bombs, 153 250-pound bombs, 32 cluster bomb units, and fired 30,000 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition. These sorties afforded some relief for the defenders, but Major Leuschner reported a growing sense of frustration among the pilots due to the persistent absence of proper targeting. In truth, a typical mission order to the air operations center would now simply direct "all T–28 go Nam Bac all day."[24]

Now and then the strikes produced impressive results. For example, the T–28 commander devised an ingenious method for silencing a mortar and machinegun that were harassing the airfield. While the RLAF was not authorized to carry napalm, a number of empty canisters were stored at Luang Prabang. These were filled with jet petroleum (JP–4) and loaded on the nine

20. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220849Z Dec 67.
21. [redacted] Msg, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, 220140Z Dec 67.
22. [redacted] Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968, p 236.
23. [redacted] Msgs, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, date illegible [ca Jan 12, 1968], 140410Z Jan 68.
24. [redacted] Msgs, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, 290220Z Dec 67, 130230Z Jan 68.

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available aircraft. The T–28s soaked down the hillside and ignited it with white phosphorous rockets. According to Major Leuschner, "We couldn't confirm whether we got the guns, but they didn't shoot from there for a long time."[25]

(S) The U.S. Air Force also kept up its interdiction. On December 24, two A–1s hit a truck park and storage area, with reports of two trucks damaged, two secondary explosions, and a secondary fire. Two days later, an A–26 spotted a five-truck convoy on Route 19. The pilot attacked with 500-pound bombs and CBUs that destroyed two trucks, triggered a secondary explosion, and touched off two secondary fires. On December 29, a pair of A–1s hit a truck park causing seven secondary explosions and six fires.[26]

(S) As the communists closed in on the doomed garrison, they moved in more antiaircraft guns to drive off the fighters and resupply aircraft. The T–28s kept attacking and the helicopters shuttled in and out of the airfield until January 1, 1968, when a heavy mortar barrage permanently shut down the field. This sealed the last hatch, but airdrops sustained the beleaguered defenders for two weeks more.

(S) With Nam Bac in its death throes, the RLAF accelerated its efforts, flying ten sorties a day with an average of seven operational aircraft. During the first week of January, the T–28s logged seventy-eight missions and in the final week of the campaign added another seventy-two, dropping sixty-three tons of bombs and firing sixty thousand rounds of ammunition. A USAF A–26 also heartened the defenders on January 7 when it struck a storage area, setting off twenty explosions and six fires.[27]

(S) Much of the credit for the continuing performance of the RLAF must go to the American enlisted men at Luang Prabang who worked alongside their Laotian counterparts to repair damaged aircraft and ready them for the next day's mission. This yeoman service, however, could not keep pace with attrition. Over the first two weeks of January, the RLAF lost six aircraft including a flight of three that just disappeared. Another seven T–28s were so damaged they required major repair. Replacement planes were flown into Luang Prabang, but Major Leuschner was down to four operational aircraft at the time Nam Bac fell.[28]

(S) Back in Vientiane the embassy staff watched with dismay as the situation at Nam Bac collapsed. Finally, after mulling over the latest reports from Major Leuschner, Colonel Pettigrew decided that direct intervention was in order. He wired his air operations center commander

> General Sourith, General Oudone, and perhaps others are at Luang Prabang. If you can get to Sourith and Oudone, see if you can sell them on the following:
> - Forget T–28 close support around Nam Bac itself, except when specific targets are identified from the ground.
> - Use T–28s in maximum effort east of Nam Bac, up Nam Ou, Route 19, on military structures and other targets as you can get them.
> - You and your boys select the targets, not TAC North. Use CAS [close air support] maximum.
> - See if generals will let you more or less take command, fly them when and as often as you want.[29]

(S) Unfortunately it was too late—Nam Bac had fallen. On January 14, 1968, the North Vietnamese had mounted a four battalion assault from their positions within the perimeter. The

25. (S) Intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Concy, DCS/Ops, RLAF, Jan 15–16, 1970; Leuschner intvw, Jan 3, 1970.
26. (S) *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLI, 2–5.
27. (S) Msgs, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, 050200Z Jan 68, 130230Z Jan 68; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLII, 2–3.
28. (S) Msgs, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, date illegible [ca Jan 12, 1968], 140410Z Jan 68.
29. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to AOC Luang Prabang, 141015Z Jan 68.

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defenders might have been able to fight their way out, but morale had sunk to the point that resistance ceased. At two in the afternoon, all contact with Nam Bac was lost and a search by RLAF aircraft showed no signs of survivors. Major Leuschner reported that the entire Nam Bac complex appeared to be deserted. He directed the T–28s to destroy the 105-mm howitzers left behind by the FAR. Later in the month, three F–105s flew the final sorties of the campaign to destroy the remaining supplies.[30]

For several months, stragglers drifted into Muong Ngoi; but by April, only fifteen hundred of the men had been accounted for. Equipment losses were likewise staggering. Nearly $1.3 million in Military Assistance Program supplies were abandoned. Among them were seven howitzers, fifty-two mortars, forty-nine recoilless rifles, over a million rounds of small-arms ammunition, and thirty-three thousand artillery shells. According to Ambassador Sullivan, "This, therefore, is the largest military disaster in the history of Laos."[31] The king had a few choice words for his generals. He told Souvanna and the General Staff he considered the whole affair a "disgrace" and that the sole solution seemed to be to fire the whole General Staff.[32] In typical Laotian fashion, however, nothing was done. Indeed, the generals tried to place the blame on the RLAF for failure to resupply and to furnish adequate air support. A CIA analysis was probably closer to the mark: "This defeat did not need to happen. It did happen . . . primarily because of poor leadership and poor tactical implementation of basic plans and concepts by officers of the Royal Laotian government."[33]

As the Americans had feared, the loss of Nam Bac shattered FAR morale and virtually erased these forces as a factor in the war. The loss of three thousand men not only represented 6 percent of the total army strength, it also meant the depletion of a third of the mobile field force. After Nam Bac, the army rarely ventured outside the major towns. Thus a single battle overturned almost four years of American military assistance. Although the Army attaché and the deputy chief of JUSMAGTHAI set about at once to rebuild the army, three years passed before it again emerged as an effective military force.

The fall of Nam Bac also crippled CIA intelligence collection in northwestern Laos. The communists methodically mopped up progovernment guerrillas in the area, compelling the CIA to withdraw its roadwatch teams from Route 19. More ominous, the demise of Nam Bac spurred Chinese activity in northern Laos. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma had agreed in 1962 to let the Chinese construct a road from Mengla in China to Pak Beng on the Mekong River. By the time of the Geneva accords, the road had been completed to Phong Saly when construction was halted. Then, after the fall of Nam Bac, work suddenly resumed. Eventually, the Chinese had as many as ten thousand men working on the road. At first, both Laotian and U.S. aircraft bombed the road. The Chinese responded by bringing in antiaircraft guns that drove off the T–28s and made it most hazardous for the jets. Shortly after President Nixon took office, the Air Force was barred from bombing the road or conducting reconnaissance flights in the area except for U–2 aircraft (controlled by the National Security Agency but flown by Air Force crews).

American intelligence analysts puzzled over the Chinese objectives. Some felt the Chinese wished to open an infiltration route to support the communist insurgency in northeastern Thailand. Others figured the Chinese wanted to counter the enlarged North Vietnamese influence in northwestern Laos. Whatever the case, it was clear China had in effect annexed the area between the road and their border. As one CIA analyst commented, "Northern Laos has a new border."[34]

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30. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 4243, 031105Z Feb 68, AOC Luang Prabang to AIRA Vientiane, 140410Z Jan 68, 141050Z Jan 68. (b) (1) (b) (3)
31. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 4243, 031105Z Feb 68; Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968, p 235. (S)
32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 4675, 231135Z Jan 68.
33. Msg, [redacted] Mar 15, 1968. CIA
34. Msg, PACAF to DIA, 010215Z Jul 71, subj: Chicom Objectives in Northwestern Laos.

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The War in Northern Laos

(S) With the FAR out of combat, the continued survival of the Laotian government hinged more and more on the Meo guerrillas of General Vang Pao and the support of the U.S. Air Force. Of course, Ambassador Sullivan had been concerned about the level of air support—and his control over it—ever since he arrived in Laos. In theory, President Johnson's March 11, 1966, directive had resolved this issue. It gave the Joint Chiefs of Staff/National Security Council direct control of Rolling Thunder, MACV responsibility for South Vietnam and the infiltration routes through southern Laos, and the Vientiane embassy control of operations in northern Laos. Ambassador Sullivan additionally retained some influence over operations in southern Laos through his control of the rules of engagement. Over the years, however, General Westmoreland had basically tucked this area into his domain.

(S) The Seventh Air Force was tasked to support all three areas, with first priority going to General Westmoreland's command and second priority to Rolling Thunder.[35] Therefore, the majority of the air strikes in northern Laos were weather diverts from North Vietnam or Steel Tiger.

(S) In effect, the ambassador had the responsibility but not the resources. The Seventh Air Force had the resources but not the responsibility (beyond the fuzzy stricture to support the Royal Laotian Government on a "recurring basis"). The air attaché and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force had neither the resources nor the responsibility, but were thrust in between the other two. All parties considered this a completely unworkable arrangement, but they could not come up with an acceptable alternative.

(S) Consequently, Seventh Air Force resisted providing a higher level of air support without having a say in its use. This was something the embassy, and more so the CIA, were never willing to grant. For "security reasons" the CIA refused to share its plans with the Air Force. The agency thought it possessed the expertise to plan and direct air operations and expected the Air Force to simply furnish the planes and crews to be used (misused in the view of the Seventh Air Force) as the CIA saw fit.

(S) The Seventh Air Force questioned the need for "security" and challenged the agency's expertise in air operations. In the Air Force view, the CIA was too parochial, centering on events in northern Laos and disregarding theater-wide commitments; and the airmen felt the CIA could not adequately plan and direct air operations in support of Laotian ground forces. What the Air Force wanted was consultation during initial planning, allowing the Air Force to determine where, when, and how many planes were needed. In the words of Maj. Gen. Louis T. Seith, deputy commander of Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force: "We have been pressing CAS [CIA] for ten months to bring us in on their planning when it is originally conceived. Conversations did no good and written requests were initiated."[36]

(S) This conflict simmered beneath the surface throughout the war, emerging from time to time in various forms (Bango/Whiplash, rules of engagement, sortie allocation, etc.). In all of these, the core issue was close air support for the Meo, though it was usually couched in terms of interdiction. In late 1967, this clash spilled over into the prop versus jet controversy.

(S) In September, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis prepared a study comparing the relative effectiveness of propeller and jet aircraft in destroying trucks. Based on the first eight months of 1967, the study showed prop aircraft to be nearly ten times as effective as jets, but with a loss rate four times greater. The analysis revealed that jet aircraft flew 74 percent of the attack sorties in Laos but accounted for only 25 percent of the destroyed or damaged (366 vehicles destroyed/damaged for 22,599 sorties or 1.4 trucks per 100 sorties at

35. (S) In practice, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff/National Security Council released a target in North Vietnam, General Momyer threw everything he had against it, regardless of the situation in the south.
36. (S) EOTR, Maj Gen Louis T. Seith, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Mar 27, 1969.

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a cost of seven hundred thousand dollars per truck). Prop aircraft, on the other hand, flew 25 percent of the sorties (7,810), yet destroyed or damaged 72 percent of the trucks (966) or 12.3 per 100 sorties at a cost of fifty-five thousand dollars per truck.[37] During these operations, eight jet and twelve prop planes were lost, giving a loss rate of 0.37 per 1,000 sorties for the jets and 1.25 per 1,000 sorties for the prop aircraft.[38]

(S) Weighing the alternative courses of action, the study concluded that substitution of two A–1 squadrons for a like number of F–4s would result in an increase of one thousand trucks per year destroyed or damaged against an additional loss of eight aircraft a year. The study noted, however, that the scarcity of prop planes in the USAF inventory would restrict further deployments to Southeast Asia. As of June 30, 1967, the Air Force had twenty-seven T–28s with twelve already deployed to Southeast Asia and eight to Panama. Twelve of thirty-one A–26s were also in Southeast Asia, as were fifty of the eighty-nine A–1s in the USAF inventory. Transfers from the U.S. Navy and the Vietnamese Air Force could add another one hundred fifty A–1s to the pot. The study considered the A–1 the sole viable candidate for additional deployments, but warned that if all these planes were made available, there would not be sufficient replacement aircraft to maintain a viable prop force beyond 1970. Indeed, any buildup in enemy defenses—which the study judged likely—would boost the projected loss rate and dictate an earlier conversion to jets.

> As the U.S. improved its capability to impede infiltration and supply in the Laotian corridor (either with propeller aircraft or other means) the North Vietnamese are likely to increase their AAA defenses in the area . . . the use of propeller aircraft in such a heavily defended environment will increase the attrition rates and might degrade their effectiveness. . . . As the AAA density increases, we might be forced to replace the propeller aircraft with jets or sustain very high loss rates.[39]

In other words, the Air Force would ultimately have to go to an all jet force.

(S) Copies of the study were sent to both Saigon and Vientiane with a cover letter that warned "In view of the above and 7th Air Force judgment that jets are more flexible operationally, I doubt that further action on this matter is worthwhile."[40] Apparently the Saigon embassy opted to pursue the subject anyway. A memo to Eugene M. Locke, the deputy ambassador, bearing the initials "EB" (Ellsworth Bunker?) said, "It seems to me that if, as the attached report indicated, propeller aircraft are approximately ten times as effective as jet aircraft, the logic is inescapable that we ought to secure as many as we can for the Laos operation."[41]

(S) Ambassador Sullivan also pursued the issue—on November 15, during a visit by Lt. Gen. Glen W. Martin, Deputy Chief of Staff, Plans and Operations, USAF, he cited the study to support his bid for more sorties in northern Laos. The present sorties, he said, were doing a good job but there were too few of them. He further recognized that many of the targets were more political than military, but argued the necessity to show the Royal Laotian Government that the United States was interested in the flow of supplies westward as well as southward.

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37. (S) The study did not account for the remaining 3 percent of the trucks destroyed or damaged. Presumably they were destroyed by ground action, that is, roadwatch teams, Shining Brass, etc.

38. (S) Study, ASD/SA, Analysis of the Use of Propeller vs Jet Aircraft in Laos, Sep 29, 1967. Five tables of statistics accompanied this study. Comparing these figures with the conclusions in the narrative, the author found numerous discrepancies. No explanation for these discrepancies can be offered.

39. (S) *Ibid.*

40. (S) Ltr, Victor K. Heymand, Dir/SEA Prgms Div, ASD/SA, to Honorable Eugene M. Locke, Dep Amb, Saigon, Oct 2, 1967.

41. (S) Memo, Ofc/Amb to Dep Amb Eugene M. Locke, Saigon, Oct 27, 1967.

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Apparently General Martin was not impressed, as Sullivan apprised the State Department,

> My quotation of these statistics, as usual, seemed to raise the normal Maxwell Field suspicions that I have a conflict of interest stockholding situation in the Sopwith Camel Manufacturing Company and perhaps even a surreptitious membership in the propeller club.[42]

Martin did sense the ambassador's underlying motive. On his return to Washington he advised General McConnell, Air Force chief of staff, that Sullivan's principal interest in props was that their use would not extend much beyond Laos due to their vulnerability, "thus they are likely to remain in effect under his control full time."[43]

A copy of the Defense Department study found its way to General Momyer, who penned a note to Maj. Gen. Gordon F. Blood, his director of operations: "Hold this close. Would like an analysis as soon as we can get it completed. Draft a memo to General Westmoreland of my analysis. Also a draft memo from him to Ambassador Locke."[44]

General Blood had his operations analysis people turn out a study challenging the Defense Department findings. This study noted that flak suppression, escort, and attacks against fixed targets were included in the jet sorties. On the other hand, fixed targets, search and rescue, and helicopter escort were included in the prop figures. Excluding these factors and confining the analysis to a permissive environment, the overall superiority of prop aircraft was reduced to two to one. In addition, jets were scheduled and configured primarily for hard targets, while prop planes were armed and employed mainly for armed reconnaissance, search and rescue, and close air support. Thus, the Defense Department study was comparing apples and oranges. The Seventh Air Force study concluded that if the analysis were expanded to take in North Vietnam (where the A–1s rarely operated) and compared the same number of aircraft on the same mission, the jet force actually had better results.[45]

Back in Washington, the issue also received attention. Despite the admonition that further action was not worthwhile, Secretary McNamara presented the Defense Department study to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on December 19. With but ten days to prepare a reply, the JCS passed a request for comments down the command chain with progressively shortened suspense dates.[46]

Fortunately Momyer was ready. The Seventh Air Force reply conceded that the A–1 was relatively more effective at destroying trucks in a slightly defended environment, but that was just a small part of the problem. The proper way to cut down on infiltration, Momyer contended, was to strike the supplies as close to the source as possible and not wait until they were dispersed throughout the trail network in Laos. This called for a force that could penetrate the highly defended Hanoi/Haiphong area. Since weather was often unpredictable, the maximum force—armed for hard targets—had to be on hand to capitalize on any opportunity. Second, it was necessary to attack the supplies throughout the lines of communication all the way from the ports to South Vietnam. Only the jet force could do this. Thus, Seventh Air Force felt it could not afford the luxury of a highly specialized aircraft that could strike just a portion of the lines of communication. General Momyer also asserted that most jet strikes on trucks were diverts from fixed targets in North Vietnam. He accepted the reduced effectiveness inherent in this secondary role.

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42. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 171030Z Nov 67.
43. Ltr, Lt Gen Glen W. Martin, DCS/Plans & Ops, USAF, to Gen John P. McConnell, CSAF, subj: Preliminary Trip Report—SEA, Nov 21, 1967.
44. Memo, Comdr, 7th AF, to DCS/Ops, 7th AF, Nov 4, 1967.
45. Working Paper 67/16, Dir/Ops Analys, 7th AF, Comparative Analysis of Propeller and Jet Aircraft, Dec 18, 1967.
46. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 5606, 201740Z Dec 67, subj: The Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in SEA.

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The Seventh Air Force commander added that in Laos enemy defenses were steadily improving. The A–1 was already restricted from operating in some areas of eastern Laos, and it was but a matter of time before the aircraft would be confined to the lightly defended areas of northern Laos (a fact Ambassador Sullivan was well aware of). From an operational standpoint, General Momyer considered the tradeoff undesirable. In addition, the introduction of AC–130 gunships and electronic sensors was expected to increase truck attrition far beyond anything possible with additional A–1s.[47]

General Westmoreland lined up behind his air commander. The MACV reply (drafted by Seventh Air Force) concluded

> To consider substituting propeller aircraft for F–4 capability is to deny the air component commander much needed flexibility and versatility in optimizing the out-of-country air campaign. . . . This Headquarters supports the 7AF rationale.[48]

General Ryan, CINCPACAF, also supported the Seventh Air Force, but he took a slightly different tack. Since an increase in A–1s would strengthen the truck-killing program, PACAF proposed that the two A–1 squadrons be deployed in addition to the F–4s. This would enhance overall efficiency without compromising the jet force. If a tradeoff was needed, Ryan suggested the T–28s and A–26s rather than F–4s.[49]

CINCPAC did not have time to digest these replies and meet the suspense date to the JCS. To get some breathing room, Admiral Sharp informed the Joint Chiefs that the Defense Department study was too narrow to be a basis for aircraft substitution. A more comprehensive analysis embracing overall aircraft needs of Southeast Asia was required. Such a study was under way, Sharp said, and its findings along with his recommendations would be forwarded on March 1.[50]

Meanwhile, Sullivan opened a new front. He put his case before the State Department on December 27, saying, "There is much opinion among my experts here that any propeller-driven plane can do more than those Mach 2 monsters which can't see the trees for the blur of the forest."[51] The experts the ambassador referred to were his air attaché staff. One member of this staff (Capt. Arthur B. Cornelius) had prepared a study revealing the real concerns of the embassy and air attaché staff. Cornelius opened by stating categorically, "The air support requirements in Barrel Roll stem primarily from the needs of the forces commanded by General Vang Pao." Jet aircraft, he said, were suitable for interdiction of fixed targets. However, in close air support (and armed reconnaissance) the margin of error was reduced as much as seventy-five percent. One miss in the wrong direction was unacceptable. For these missions the jet aircraft normally available (F–4s and F–105s) were unsuitable. They did not carry the proper ordnance and their crews were unfamiliar with low-level delivery techniques. In contrast, the A–1s usually carried antipersonnel ordnance and the crews knew how to deliver it, having honed their skills in search and rescue and helicopter escort duties. Moreover, the A–1 was slow enough to pick up friendly and enemy positions, had sufficient endurance to stay around for hours, and could go as low as needed to support friendly troops. It was not a matter of willingness, Cornelius said, but a question of aircraft capability and aircrew familiarity.

Summing up, Cornelius said the A–1 was indispensable. If jets had to be used, they should be suitably equipped with cluster bomb units, napalm, and high-drag bombs; and their crews would require a series of training missions to requalify in low-level bombing. As an alternative, Cornelius

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47. [redacted] See note 45.
48. [redacted] Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 240815Z Dec 67, subj: Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in SEA.
49. [redacted] Msg, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 232343Z Dec 67, subj: Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in SEA.
50. [redacted] Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 262003Z Dec 67, subj: Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in SEA.
51. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 687, 272729Z Dec 67.

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suggested that F–100s from South Vietnam be aerially refueled and employed in Barrel Roll. After all, they were familiar with and configured for the close air support mission. The study's conclusion articulated the feeling that lay behind Ambassador Sullivan's efforts: "We have few enough allies in this area who are willing to fight for themselves. General Vang Pao deserves all the support we can provide."[52]

The State Department decided not to get involved at this point. On January 4, 1968, the JCS briefed Defense Secretary McNamara on CINCPAC's request for more time. Approving the extension, McNamara directed that the new study include an analysis of day versus night sortie effectiveness in Laos, the reasons for so many day sorties in view of the efficacy of night ones, and the degree that prop versus jet efficiency reflected the differences in mission rather than aircraft design and the impact of enemy defenses.[53]

The study turned out to be a refinement of the early Seventh Air Force paper. Forwarded to the JCS on February 17, 1968, it strongly recommended against any aircraft substitution; but no mention was made of adding A–1s to the existing force. The Joint Chiefs endorsed CINCPAC's recommendations and sent the study to the Secretary of Defense on February 29. McNamara accepted the JCS position and the matter appeared to be closed—at least for a while.[54]

Ambassador Sullivan was not yet ready to drop the issue. He came out in the open for close air support and his control of that support (the real issue behind all of the earlier sparring). Citing the dearth of air support, he told the State Department

> I have been troubled particularly by the problem of obtaining sufficient airstrike support directed on key targets in Laos at the time such air support is required. Taking into consideration our own requirement for tactical air support in combating the enemy threat in Laos and priorities that 7th AF must fulfill, I would suggest that "high level" consideration be given to a fundamental re-ordering of our air support resources. . . . This proposal is not new but given current tactical pressures in Laos, I believe it merits serious reconsideration.[55]

Sullivan's action was impelled by a sharp decline in Barrel Roll sorties due to the Tet offensive in South Vietnam. During January, northern Laos had received only eight A–1/A–26 sorties, and even these were withdrawn during February to support Khe Sanh.[56] Sullivan made the "fundamental re-ordering" he had in mind clear in a message to the Seventh Air Force:

> We have for some years now been attempting to conduct a counter-insurgency program in Laos with an absolute minimum of U.S. involvement. . . . The most striking and conspicuous, as well as the most effective U.S. input, has been . . . the USAF.
>
> During these past three years, we have tried several variations of administrative control to match these air resources with our guerrilla operations. . . . However, no matter what we have done, the result has always . . . been makeshift and patchwork.
>
> The fact is that our "air resources" for Laos have been those which, on any given day, Seventh Air Force has been able to spare from other operations. Except for Steel Tiger/Tiger Hound . . . Laos air operations have been the step-children of circumstances.
>
> I fully appreciate . . . what management problems you have faced in . . . other parts of your parish. . . . I am not sure that you, in Saigon, are able to appreciate just how impossible this situation renders our task. . . .

52. Ltr, Capt Arthur B. Cornelius, AIRA Ofc/Vientiane to AIRA Vientiane, subj: Effectiveness of Various Types of Aircraft in Barrel Roll, MR–2, n.d. [ca late 1967].
53. JCSM 2344/134–1, Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in Laos, Jan 4, 1968.
54. JCSM–129–68, Use of Propeller and Jet Aircraft in Laos, Feb 29, 1968.
55. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220755Z Feb 68, subj: Tactical Air Support.
56. *Ibid.*

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[redacted]

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> For various reasons, . . . we are a separate operational entity here in Laos. As such, it would be logical for us to have at least one air unit which could be a known quantity in our operations and which we could task. . . . I wish to stress that I am not, repeat not, talking about operational control or frag responsibility. . . . I guess the word that I want is "dedication."[57]

Specifically, the ambassador wanted the 56th Air Commando Wing that was located at Nakhon Phanom, since it was ideally suited to support counterinsurgency operations.[58] He went on to explain that he would task the 56th for sixteen A–1 and four T–28 sorties per day plus seven A–26 sorties per night for Barrel Roll. Steel Tiger would be allotted six A–1s and two A–26s [redacted] In addition, the Seventh Air Force could schedule as many jet sorties as it needed against USAF targets in Steel Tiger in accordance with the rules of engagement. Sullivan further expected to still receive diverts from North Vietnam and that Seventh Air Force would contribute extra sorties or "air packages" to support certain operations. But the ambassador—who was always conscious of his prerogatives—showed no willingness to give the Seventh Air Force a part in planning operations it was counted on to support.[59]

(b)(1) STATE

At first glance, Sullivan's request for what amounted to over eleven hundred sorties a month (besides diverts and special air packages) would indeed seem to be a "fundamental re-ordering" of priorities.[60] However, since only the 56th Air Commando Wing was involved, most of the increase would be at the expense of Steel Tiger. The ambassador felt sorties in Steel Tiger "were fragged in more or less automatically in order to make a sortie total for the day, when we had good targets 'a-wasting' up in the north."[61] (Of course, Sullivan's proposal would schedule sorties into the north "more or less automatically" while, in the Seventh Air Force's view, good targets were "a-wasting" in the south.)

Ambassador Sullivan went on to complain that it was impossible to plan operations when he did not know from one day to the next what his air support would be.[62] On the other hand, the Seventh Air Force argued it could not schedule sorties when it did not know from one day to the next what operations were being planned.[63] The ambassador contended that a certain number of aircraft were needed with crews who knew the terrain, could meet daily with Meo [redacted] and could "appreciate the predicament the little guys were in"—not someone who "sort of casually drops in on this war once every month or so."[64]

(b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

Sullivan's bid for control of the 56th Air Commando Wing was strongly supported by Colonel Pettigrew and many of the younger officers associated with the war in northern Laos. These officers, in general, felt that Barrel Roll operations needed to be placed on a more systematic basis to assure adequate air support. However, there was no doubt that such control would also have enhanced the air attaché's role.[65]

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57. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to 7th AF, 4584, 200754Z Feb 68.
58. By February 1968, the 56th Air Commando Wing possessed the following aircraft in seven squadrons: forty-three A–1s, twelve U–10s, twelve T–28s, six C–123s, twelve A–26s, thirteen CH–3s, and forty-three O–1s/O–2s. [USAF Management Summary, Feb 2, 1968, SEA 21.]
59. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to 7th AF, 4584, 200754Z Feb 68.
60. During 1967, Barrel Roll received roughly 250 scheduled sorties plus 500 diverts a month. North Vietnam received 2,500 scheduled sorties; Steel Tiger, 4,500; and South Vietnam, 10,000.
61. (S) Intvw, Majs Samuel E. Riddlebarger and Richard B. Clement, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Amb William H. Sullivan, Asst SECSTATE/FE Affairs, Apr 15, 1970.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Intvw, Maj Richard B. Clement and Capt Ralph G. Swenston, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Gen George S. Brown, Comdr, 7th AF, Oct 19–20, 1970.
64. Intvw, Majs Samuel E. Riddlebarger and Richard B. Clement, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Amb William H. Sullivan, Asst SECSTATE/FE Affairs, Apr 15, 1970.
65. Intvw, Capt Roger Lewis, Proj Corona Harvest, AU, with Col Paul A. Pettigrew, AIRA Vientiane, Dec 16, 1969.

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The issue raised went beyond the familiarity of crews with the terrain, aircraft suitability, or sortie allocation. At the heart of the matter was the issue of centralized control of air power. Even though Ambassador Sullivan claimed that he did not want to "control" the wing (in the administrative sense), "dedication" would have given him operational control because the "dedicated" aircraft could not be used elsewhere without his approval. With control of the A–1/A–26 strikes in Steel Tiger, he could have influenced the interdiction campaign there (he already had some indirect sway through his control of the rules of engagement); and by controlling the helicopters and their escorts, he could have throttled Westmoreland's Shining Brass operations that vied with the CIA roadwatch teams. Since the A–1s provided search and rescue escort for operations against North Vietnam, Sullivan could have injected himself into CINCPAC's domain. With the 56th also engaged in the [redacted] program, the ambassador's proposal would also have taken him into Ambassador Graham A. Martin's bailiwick. These intrusions would surely have drawn fire from CINCPAC, Westmoreland, and Martin. Finally, had Ambassador Sullivan controlled the 56th Air Commando Wing at the time of the Tet offensive and Khe Sanh, he would have been able to influence those battles as well. All of this was anathema to the Air Force high command.

(b)(1)
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Col. Roland K. McCoskrie, commander of the 56th ACW, expressed this feeling:

> Everybody wanted his own private air force. . . . They all thought they had the biggest job in Southeast Asia and they wanted the whole damn thing dedicated to them. There just wasn't any reason for that. They got everything they wanted—they just didn't get to run it—which is what they really wanted. Had they been given control . . . they wouldn't have come out any better, probably worse.
>
> They weren't able to see the big picture. There were lots of times—like Khe Sanh—when we devoted our entire effort to that one battle. . . . If we had to go through the Embassy to get permission to pull off all strikes we would have lost a lot of time.
>
> The politicians, the State Department folks, really don't know how a military operation has to work. You take a decision and get at it rather than sit down and worry about whether you are going to offend Vang Pao if you take all those airplanes and put them down south. That kind of stuff isn't really germane but they would have done that if they controlled the wing.[66]

General Momyer viewed the issue from a theater-wide perspective:

> During the 1965–1967 time period, Ambassador Sullivan never felt there was enough airpower devoted to the war in Laos. He raised his issue through diplomatic and military channels on a number of occasions. The argument advanced by the Embassy was one most frequently used by an organization that wanted sole control of airpower to support its mission. . . . In effect the Embassy was sealing off a geographic area and requesting that airpower be fragmented for that area. . . .
>
> As Seventh Air Force Commander I vigorously resisted this effort for a number of fundamental reasons. The most significant was that it robbed the commander of the flexibility to employ the forces where there was the greatest potential for decisive action. . . . If airpower had been divided up . . . there would have been insufficient forces to support the war in South Vietnam, Laos, and the strikes in North Vietnam. . . .
>
> CINCPAC considered the war in North Vietnam a priority commitment; COMUSMACV considered his mission in South Vietnam to be the dominant consideration and the Ambassador in Laos was of the unshakable conviction that preservation of the status quo in Laos was the most important requirement for the utilization of airpower. . . .

66. Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Roland K. McCoskrie, Comdr, 56th ACW, Jul 14, 1975.

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[redacted]

> The only way these conflicting requirements could be resolved was through the centralized control of airpower by Seventh Air Force. The decision to satisfy one demand over another finally had to be made by the commander depending on the criticality of the situation at that particular time. . . .
>
> When the JCS released a target in North Vietnam for attack, there was intense pressure to eliminate that target and priority was given to that task. This often meant reducing the support for Barrel Roll or Steel Tiger. It was the same thing during the Tet offensive and the battle of Khe Sanh. We pulled everything off to stabilize the situation there. . . .
>
> Regardless of the decision, the shift of support from one area to another was bound to and did provoke an energetic response from the activity suffering the temporary loss of sorties. . . . [However,] anytime a situation developed that constituted a grave threat to the security of forces or facilities, Seventh Air Force diverted whatever airpower was required to help stabilize the situation.[67]

Gen. George S. Brown, successor to General Momyer as Seventh Air Force commander, was even more blunt:

> Sullivan didn't know what the hell he was talking about. He always dealt in terms of "X" sorties, a guaranteed level of effort, when he should have dealt in terms of targets and let us determine the weight of effort needed. . . . It could be they needed more than they thought. Most of the time that probably wasn't true.
>
> The ideal thing would have been . . . to plan their campaigns as they were in the south [SVN]. When they had an operation coming up, they should have come to 7/13th headquarters with an outline plan, saying, "This is what we propose to do, let's get our planners together and work up an air plan to support the ground campaign." But they didn't do that. [redacted] people up there would sit down and work this whole thing out with the Attachés, who didn't influence them very much, and then they'd come and want "X" sorties. They just didn't know what the hell they were talking about.[68]

(b)(1) STATE

Actually, Sullivan's case was not without merit, but his timing could not have been worse. On the very day the ambassador sent his message to Seventh Air Force, General Momyer was meeting with Lt. Gen. Robert E. Cushman, commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force, to resolve their differences over control of Marine aviation. General Cushman advanced basically the same argument as Ambassador Sullivan; and if Momyer had approved the ambassador's request, his concept for a single manager for air in Vietnam would have been doomed. Consequently, there was no way he could accede to Sullivan's wishes, even if he had been inclined to.

The Tet offensive was now in full swing, and the Seventh Air Force had pulled virtually everything out of Laos and North Vietnam to stop the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army. This swift decisive response to the enemy move was probably Momyer's strongest argument for flexible centralized control. Sullivan deemed the Seventh Air Force reply completely unacceptable and answered with another broadside:

> Your message . . . set forth the position which I frankly expected you to take. . . . It is the fulfillment of our daily, constructive, but essential operations, rather than response to crises that I have made my dedication proposal for the 56th ACW. I have repeated that proposal to Washington in the hope that authorities there would be disposed to relieve you of some of your priority obligations in other fields in order to aid us in these rather dry pastures.[69]

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67. Gen William W. Momyer, USAF, Ret, "Air Power in Three Wars WW II, Korea, Vietnam," manuscript, pp 188–192. In the final published version (Washington, 1978), pp 84–88, Momyer softened his wording.
68. See note 63.
69. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to 7th AF, 4647, 221051Z Feb 68.

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This time the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency came to Ambassador Sullivan's aid. Taking note of his problems in obtaining air support, Assistant Secretary Bundy informed the ambassador, "This larger item of course raises more fundamental questions and will require resolutions at high level. . . . We have meanwhile weighed in with Defense and will follow the matter closely."[70] Citing the critical conditions at Lima Site 85, the CIA argued for an instant increase in air support for the defenders.[71]

The military, however, closed ranks against the outsiders. General Westmoreland, COMUSMACV, backed his air component commander, but Admiral Sharp, CINCPAC, was caught on the horns of a dilemma. In the past, he had leaned toward the Marine position on control of air power and had blocked several bids by Momyer and Westmoreland to gain control of Marine aviation. Yet, he was unwilling to extend this logic to the ambassador. Consequently he threw his weight behind Momyer. On February 28, 1968, Sharp advised the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "The position [Momyer's] is sound and basic to the principle of effective use of air resources. The necessity for maintaining flexibility . . . precludes the dedication of any portion of TACAIR resources to a specific area or mission."[72]

The Joint Chiefs were of like mind. A memo, signed by General McConnell as acting chairman, set forth their support for centralized control.[73] It now remained for the final scene to be played out in Saigon. On March 8, Westmoreland designated Momyer "single manager for air" and ordered the Marines to assign all fixed-wing aircraft to the operational control of the Seventh Air Force.[74] Although this decision applied solely to South Vietnam, it also ended any hope for Sullivan's bid.

In the face of this stone wall, the ambassador backpedaled. At a SEACOORD meeting on March 9, Sullivan alleged he had been "misunderstood" on "dedication" and that people were "obfuscating" the issue by continually drawing attention to the total sorties flown in Barrel Roll. He conceded the number was impressive and often exceeded his requests; but, he contended, northern Laos had become a "dumping ground" for diverts from North Vietnam that had but a few minutes in the target area due to low fuel. It was not uncommon, he said, for a forward air controller to suddenly receive fifty or sixty sorties all screaming for a target before they ran out of fuel. Under these circumstances, the FAC had to put them in on whatever target was available at the moment regardless of its value. At other times, the FACs might go for several days with no strike sorties whatever while the enemy poured in men and supplies. While there were a lot of aircraft striking in Laos, none seemed to be available to work with the Laotians on a preplanned basis.[75]

Sullivan then repeated his basic thesis. What he had sought in his original proposal was

> assurance that we could have reliable, dependable programmed air sorties which could be directed to support specific ground operations at a given hour and on a given day. This is a far cry from the random receipt of a couple of dozen jet missions which were unable to find a hole near Hanoi and hence can drop a wing load of bombs on a road segment in North Laos before lunch on some rainy weekday.[76]

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70. Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 20863, 261537Z Feb 68.
71. *Ibid.*
72. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 280150Z Feb 68, subj: Tactical Air Support in Laos.
73. CM-3060-68 to SECDEF, Tactical Air Support in Laos, Feb 27, 1968. Attached to this memorandum was a letter from Secretary of Defense McNamara to Secretary of State Rusk setting forth the JCS position. However, it was unsigned and had a red line drawn through it; so apparently it was never sent.
74. Directive, COMUSMACV to Dep Comdr/Air Ops, Single Manager of Strike and Reconnaissance Assets, Mar 8, 1968.
75. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 090903Z Mar 68.
76. *Ibid.*

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The generals listened politely and assured the ambassador they would do their best; but with Tet and the battle for Khe Sanh, there was very little left over for Laos. Clearly, Ambassador Sullivan had lost another round. Within a matter of days, however, the North Vietnamese would gain for him much of what he had failed to gain on his own by focusing their attention on a remote mountain called Phou Phathi.

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Chapter XI

The End of the Quiet War (U)

(U) The mountain of Phou Phathi was located twenty miles west of the Pathet Lao capital of Samneua and just fifteen miles from the North Vietnamese border. Towering fifty-eight hundred feet, it was one of the highest and most isolated outposts in northern Laos. Sheer cliffs rising sixteen hundred feet above the valley floor made the site inaccessible from three sides. The fourth side was steep and heavily wooded but could be conquered by the agile Meo. Long a Meo stronghold, it had become a symbol of their power and influence in Samneua Province. Except for a period in 1959 when it was occupied briefly by the communists, Phou Phathi had successfully resisted all attacks. From there the Meo had been conducting forays to harass the Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese and to gather intelligence.

(U) In the early 1960s, a seven-hundred-foot dirt landing strip had been constructed in the valley, along with a smaller helicopter pad right below the summit. Known as Lima Site 85, the airfield was used chiefly by Air America to bring in supplies and give the defenders a link to the outside world. Air Force helicopters also used the site from time to time during search and rescue operations, and in mid-1966, the Air Force set up a tacan station atop the mountain. Its periodic maintenance was taken care of by a sheep-dipped USAF circuit rider team from the 1st Mobile Communications Group; but, [redacted] were permanently stationed at the site. (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

(U) Soon after the tacan was in place, USAF planners considered a radar site in northern Laos to provide an all-weather bombing capability over North Vietnam for Rolling Thunder strikes. Analysis showed that, between October 1966 and February 1967, bad weather resulted in less than twenty-five percent of the sorties scheduled against the Hanoi/Haiphong area reaching their targets. Existing radar sites furnished all-weather coverage of South Vietnam, southern Laos, and southern North Vietnam, but none of these sites could reach into the vital Red River delta. Having a radar at Lima Site 85 would cover the entire Hanoi/Haiphong complex and, as a side benefit, cover Barrel Roll as well. Several locations other than Phou Phathi were rejected due to distance or terrain masking.[1]

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(U) Ambassador Sullivan reacted negatively to the proposal. He said a tacan was a passive, unmanned facility that could be explained as a general navigation aid. A radar site, however, was a positive control system that would enmesh U.S. ground personnel in offensive operations against North Vietnam. Because this would engender major political risks for the Laotian government, the ambassador expressed "grave doubts" that the prime minister would approve. He warned it was "not the intention or tactic" of the Meo to commit forces to a prolonged defense of any particular spot. Consequently, the North Vietnamese could overrun Lima Site 85 if they mounted a determined attack. Under such a circumstance, the Meo defenders could be counted on for a brief holding action to permit the destruction of the equipment and evacuation of U.S. personnel.[2]

(U) Feeling that the benefits outweighed the risks, the Air Force proceeded with the proposal and on April 25, 1967, the JCS recommended that the Secretary of Defense approve it.[3]

1. (U) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 250002Z Feb 67, subj: MSQ–77 in Northern Laos.
2. (U) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPACAF, 050329Z Dec 66, SECSTATE, 130930Z Mar 67.
3. (U) Ltr, CSAF to SAF, subj: MSQ–77 at Site 85 in Laos, Apr 17, 1967; JCSM–231–67 to SECDEF, Installation of MSQ–77 in Northern Laos, Apr 25, 1967.

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Subsequent meetings between the ambassador and officials of the Air Force, Defense Department, and State Department settled most of the details and on June 13 Sullivan discussed the matter with Souvanna Phouma. The prime minister said he had no objection to the site, so long as he was not "officially" informed. In other words, if the United States got caught he would claim it was done "without his knowledge." He also insisted the ground personnel wear civilian clothes and carry suitable civilian identification.[4]

Though pleased with the prime minister's response, officials back in Washington were concerned over the "apparent contradiction" between his approval and desire "not to be informed." In reply, Sullivan said this concern

> reflects acute occidental strabismus. Essentially, what Souvanna is saying is this. If we get caught . . . he will not admit that he ever heard of it. He will insist that we put it in there without his knowledge. . . .
>
> (S) This is the key element of the transaction and . . . I want to be absolutely sure that it has fully penetrated all Presbyterian consciences in Washington. . . .
>
> (S) In short, please assure me that all the little George Washingtons will bury their hatchets and not try to shake the cherry tree if the fruit hits the fan.[5]

In a later message, the ambassador went on to suggest that if the site's cover was "blown" the United States would simply remain silent or refuse comment. "This should bring all of us angels together on the head of the same pin."[6]

With this hurdle out of the way, actual work on the site could begin. The entire project was given the code name Commando Club. During August-October helicopters flew in construction crews and equipment to build crew quarters and a control bunker, as well as to level an area for the radar vans. Since the standard radar vans were too heavy to be lifted by helicopter, a light-weight version (TSQ–81) was deployed to the site. The tacan had to be moved about twenty-feet to prevent interference from the radar antenna. To reduce the risk of compromise, all USAF markings were removed from the equipment and demolition charges were attached. Efforts were made to camouflage the nature of the installation when seen from the air.[7] A pool of forty-four USAF technicians from Nakhon Phanom manned the site (designated Operating Location 28). Normally, no more than twelve of these men would be at the site at any one time and they would be rotated every twenty-four hours. In keeping with their "civilian" cover, personnel were permitted no weapons at the site and they were nominally discharged from the Air Force. Ostensibly, they were employed by Lockheed Aircraft Corporation under a United States Agency for International Development contract to repair communications facilities in Laos. They continued to draw their regular USAF pay, receive all normal benefits, and accrue seniority. After completing their tours, they were reinstated in the Air Force with no break in service.[8]

The site became fully operational in early November 1967, and the first Commando Club strike against North Vietnam was flown on the tenth. Thereafter, the number of TSQ strikes on North Vietnam steadily grew—from thirteen percent in November 1967 to fifty-five percent in February 1968. With Barrel Roll strikes in Laos added to the list of TSQ strikes in December

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4. Ltr, CSAF to SAF, May 10, 1967; memo, SAF Harold Brown to Richard C. Steadman, DEPSECDEF/FE Affairs, subj: MSQ–77 at Site 85, May 12, 1967; msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 207815, 121413Z Jun 67, AmEmb to SECSTATE, 7712, 140900Z Jun 67.
5. Msgs, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 218801, 291043Z Jun 67, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 010617Z Jul 67.
6. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 060830Z Jul 67.
7. Hist, 1st CEG (SAC), 1967, Annex.
8. Memo, Lt Col Gerald H. Britten, USA, Asst/Laos, ASD/ISA, to Stewart French, ASD/ISA, Clifford Strathern, CIA, *et al*, subj: Information for Symington Hearings, Oct 9, 1969.

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1967, again there was a constant but less dramatic rise from twenty percent to thirty-eight percent in February 1968. Since Commando Club was confined to periods when bad weather ruled out visual bombing, immediate results were never known; but poststrike photography revealed Commando Club strikes to be as accurate as visual bombing of area targets.[9]

(S) The upsurge in activity at Lima Site 85 during summer 1967 did not pass unnoticed by the Pathet Lao in Samneua. There is no proof, however, they associated this bustle with the subsequent all-weather bombing of North Vietnam. Phou Phathi was nevertheless very much on the enemy's mind. Both sides considered it the key to Samneua Province. So long as it stayed in friendly hands, the communist supply lines to the Plain of Jars were fair game to the Meo guerrillas. If Phou Phathi fell, General Vang Pao believed all of Samneua Province would follow. Hence, the stakes were high even without the radar site.

(S) According to a CIA estimate, the communists had decided the time had come to end the Meo menace once and for all. Over the 1967–68 dry season, they planned to clear out all Meo enclaves in the northeast—the main blow falling on Lima Site 85. The embassy cautioned that a combined air/ground attack could be in the works, because the North Vietnamese were known to be training for ordnance delivery with an AN–2 Colt at an airfield near Hanoi.[10] Even so, the site was the strongest defensive position in northeastern Laos. It was reasonably secure although the CIA knew it could be taken either by a major commitment of enemy troops or by a small commando team that could slip through the defenses.[11]

(S) In November and December 1967, the North Vietnamese started clearing operations around Lima Site 85 and construction of a road (Route 602) from Samneua towards Phou Den Din, a Meo outpost seven miles east of Phou Phathi. Ambushes and air strikes (67 in November and 128 in December) slowed but did not stop this enemy activity. As communist intentions became clear, reinforcements were flown into Lima Site 85. Eight hundred men formed a main defense line at the base of the mountain, with another two hundred men located at the helipad. Smaller units were scattered around a seven-mile arc to warn of the foe's approach. A rather cumbersome plan was readied to integrate the TSQ radar into the site's defense. The plan assumed the Meo would have at least twenty-four hours warning of an impending attack, and could pinpoint the enemy assembly areas. At that time, the local commander [redacted] would radio the embassy for approval to call in air strikes. The embassy in turn would alert Seventh Air Force. When the assault was imminent, the local commander would obtain final approval from the embassy and then notify the TSQ commander of the targets to be struck. Finally, the TSQ commander would call for whatever aircraft were available.[12] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA

(S) The attack on the site began on January 12, 1968, when AN–2s appeared out of North Vietnam. While two of the planes orbited near the border, the other two bombed and strafed the base. According to one observer: "It was just wacky. We saw these four incredibly slow-moving old planes coming out of North Vietnam. It was like something out of the First World War. Everybody saw them coming. . . . It was like a joke."[13] The bombing and strafing left no

9. (S) Vallentiny, *The Fall of Site 85*, pp 2–3.

10. (S) The AN–2, a fabric and metal-covered biplane of 1948 vintage, was still used widely throughout the communist world as a utility transport and crop duster. The North Vietnamese had modified four of these aircraft to carry two sixteen-shot 57-mm rocket pods and a 500-pound bomb. Inside, they had mounted twenty tubes to accommodate 120-mm mortar rounds fitted with bomb fuzes. In this configuration, the AN–2 had range of 750 nautical miles at a speed of one hundred knots. The North Vietnamese first used these modified Colts in 1966 in an unsuccessful effort to bomb 34–Alpha PT boats in the Gulf of Tonkin.

11. (S) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF, 260837Z Dec 67, subj: Site 85, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 030332Z Jan 68, subj: Security of TACAN Sites in Laos.

12. (S) 7th AF OpOrd 439–68, Sup II to Annex B, App III, Dec 27, 1967.

13. (S) T. D. Allman, "12 Americans Died in Loss of Secret Laotian Outpost," *The Washington Post*, Mar 16, 1970, p A–18.

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serious damage, and both aircraft were shot down by the defenders. One plane crashed and burned near the site; the other came down about twelve miles away and was recovered fairly intact. The two orbiting AN–2s flew back to North Vietnam without taking part in the action. A more colorful account was given [redacted] He claimed that when the Colts were first spotted, an Air America helicopter loaded with security forces took off to engage them. Being faster than the AN–2, the copter pulled alongside while security men poured machinegun fire into the ancient biplanes. Even so, evidence from the crash sites showed that both planes had been downed by ground fire.[14]

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Following the air assault, five PL/NVA battalions with three artillery pieces departed Samneua for Phou Phathi. One battalion swung north and a second circled to the south. The other three took Phou Den Din and brought their artillery to bear on the defenders at Lima Site 85. The Air Force responded to these moves by quickening the tempo of air strikes, 165 being flown during January. Typically, the two A–1s usually scheduled for armed reconnaissance were sent to Phou Phathi in the morning. After expending their ordnance, they remained in the area to control any diverts that might turn up. In the afternoon this procedure was repeated. At night a single A–26 patrolled the area. As usual, the communists made excellent use of weather, camouflage, and dispersion to minimize the effect of these strikes. The targeting was not as precise as had been hoped; and as at Nam Bac, ground forces failed to follow up any of the air strikes.[15]

Air operations peaked on January 30 when forty-five planes hit enemy positions around Lima Site 85. The next day, however, the communists launched their Tet offensive and all sorties were diverted to South Vietnam. Nevertheless, Seventh Air Force kept a watchful eye on the situation in northern Laos. On February 7, Seventh queried the embassy: "Do you have targets in area of Site 85 on which you desire strikes? 7AF will attempt to provide whatever assistance deemed necessary to insure safety of LS–85."[16] The embassy responded by nominating nine area targets but added that "we have no special targets requiring special assistance."[17] By the middle of the month, pressure had eased a bit in South Vietnam and Seventh Air Force was able to hit all nine of the recommended targets.

On February 21, four fresh North Vietnamese Army battalions arrived at Phou Den Din and took up attack positions. A Meo ambush killed several of the communists including an NVA officer who was carrying detailed plans for the upcoming attack. Under this plan, three North Vietnamese battalions and one Pathet Lao battalion were the main striking force. Final battlefield reconnaissance was to be conducted on February 22, and D–day was set for the twenty-third. To draw the attention of the defenders, one battalion was to attack from the northeast while three battalions stormed the main approach to the mountain. The document further pinpointed the Meo defensive positions and the original location of the tacan but disclosed no awareness of the TSQ site or of the relocated tacan.[18]

Armed with this information, the defenders and Seventh Air Force prepared a warm welcome. During the final week of February, the Air Force threw in an unprecedented 342 sorties (46 percent under Commando Club) that broke up the bulk of the attacks before they could form. The communists nonetheless started their main assault on schedule, and positions within the seven-mile perimeter changed hands several times. The weight of air power and the Meo's determined defense was too much, however, and by the end of the month, the North Vietnamese Army pulled back to lick its wounds and to plan the next move.[19]

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14. [redacted] *7th AF Weekly Air Intelligence Summary*, Jan 14, 1968.
15. [redacted] *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLII, 2–6.
16. [redacted] Msg, 7th AF to AIRA Vientiane, 071943Z Feb 68, subj: Air Support for LS–85.
17. [redacted] Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF, 080409Z Feb 68, subj: Air Support for LS–85.
18. [redacted] DOV 13468, Feb 27, 1968.
19. [redacted] *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLIII, 2–4.

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Despite this initial rebuff, the enemy was significantly superior in numbers and the CIA felt the site could not be held beyond March 10. The embassy therefore began to firm up an evacuation plan. It called for sufficient helicopters (three Air Force and two Air America) to lift out 155 personnel, with first priority given to evacuation of the TSQ/tacan personnel and destruction of the equipment. The ambassador would say when to evacuate and would notify Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force to launch the helicopters. Weather permitting, Seventh Air Force would also supply A–1 escort. When ordered to evacuate, the USAF personnel were to destroy their equipment and proceed to the helipad for pickup. If this was impossible, pickup would be made from the TSQ site itself.[20] About this same time, five more men were sent in to enable twenty-four-hour operation, and the technicians began to carry small arms to the site, although this was formally forbidden. In addition, they rigged several slings from the edge of the cliff to a narrow ledge just below. From there they could work their way around to the helipad.[21]

The weather turned bad on March 2 and the communists resumed their attack. This time, they were better dispersed and used their artillery more effectively to reduce the Meo strongpoints one after the other. Though the weather severely restricted visual strikes, air activity remained high. During March 1–10, crews flew 314 sorties in support of Lima Site 85 (76 percent under TSQ control). Unfortunately, the results of these strikes were minimal due to the foe's dispersion and the inability of the defenders (who were pinned down by artillery) to fix the enemy's location.[22]

As the PL/NVA closed in, alarm was felt as far away as Honolulu. On March 5, General Ryan cabled Seventh Air Force/ Thirteenth Air Force:

> Receiving daily reports concerning growing threat to Site 85. Difficult to evaluate situation from here. . . . You are authorized to direct evacuation of the site and destruction of the equipment when, in your judgment, such action is necessary. Your Oplan 439–68 is approved for this purpose.[23]

General Momyer, however, wished to keep the site operational as long as possible to facilitate the bombing of North Vietnam. Ambassador Sullivan concurred—for the moment at least.

By the tenth, enemy patrols had reached the base of the mountain and the decision could not be put off much longer. At six in the evening, the communists opened a heavy artillery barrage that temporarily drove the Air Force technicians into their bunker. When the barrage lifted two hours later, the defenders braced for an attack while the radar operators returned to their posts. The assault did not come, but intermittent shelling persisted through the night. Nevertheless, the embassy decided on a partial evacuation at first light on March 11. Meanwhile, three A–26s and five F–4s under TSQ control flew night support for the defenders, the last aircraft departing shortly after three in the morning. Finally at a quarter past five, the ambassador ordered complete evacuation of the site with pickup set for two hours later. The embassy was unaware the site had already fallen.[24]

Under cover of the artillery barrage, twenty procommunist Meo (possibly from the same group that took the site in 1959) had worked their way through the defenses and approached the summit undetected. Shortly after the last plane departed, these raiders opened fire on the TSQ site. As the Americans poured out of their vans, they were met by a hail of fire that killed three, including the TSQ commander. Their path to the helipad blocked by the attackers, the remaining

20. Memo, CAS to DCS/Ops, 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Emergency Evacuation Plan for Site 85, Feb 24, 1968; 7th AF/13th AF OPlan 439–68, Feb 26, 1968.
21. Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Richard V. Secord, Dec 18, 1974.
22. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLIV, 2–3.
23. Msg, CINCPACAF (Gen Ryan) to 7th AF/13th AF (Maj Gen Lindley), 052114Z Mar 68.
24. Msg, JANAF Attaches Laos to DIA, SECSTATE, Joint Operational Summary 42–68, Mar 11, 1968.

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personnel had no choice but to go over the cliff. Unfortunately they were spotted by the foe who tried to follow. Now it was the Americans' turn to open fire, killing five or six of the enemy. The communists quickly pulled back from the line of fire and lobbed grenades down onto the ledge. These killed eight more Americans (three bodies were blown completely off the ledge and never recovered); of the six wounded, one died on the way to Udorn.[25]

Hearing this commotion, the helipad defenders hurried up the trail to investigate. As they came upon the communists, a sharp firefight ensued and all of the attackers were killed. At dawn, the helicopters whirled in to evacuate the survivors. The Meo, having no further reason to defend the site, faded away to regroup at various lima sites farther west.

The tacan and TSQ were knocked off the air during the attack, but because the technician did not have time to detonate the demolition charges, neither facility was destroyed. The communists, however, did not immediately occupy the site so they did not realize what a prize had fallen into their hands. Indeed, Lima Site 85 was but one step in the enemy's drive to control all of Samneua. In the weeks that followed they swept on, as General Vang Pao had feared, overrunning site after site. By mid-April five more sites were in communist hands, and only Lima Site 36 stood between the North Vietnamese and the Plain of Jars.[26]

The immediate tasks for the Americans were to inform the prime minister and to destroy the equipment on Lima Site 85. The first of these fell to Ambassador Sullivan who personally broke the bad news to Souvanna Phouma. When told the equipment had not been destroyed, the prime minister visibly winced but made no reply. Since the communists had made no announcement, it was agreed to sit tight and await developments.[27] As it turned out, there was never a need for a public statement. The communists mentioned that American "advisors" had been killed, but were silent on the radar site until the story appeared in the American press nearly two years later. By then, the war had escalated to the point that the whole issue had become moot.

The second task, destroying the TSQ and tacan, was left to the Air Force. Between March 12 and 18, ninety-five jet sorties were flown against the site, one using a Bullpup guided missile. The strikes wiped out almost everything on the mountain except the abandoned facilities. Finally, on March 19, two A–1s from the 56th Air Commando Wing completely leveled the site in a single pass.[28]

Even before the loss of Phou Phathi, Seventh Air Force and the embassy had been seeking several alternate sites for the TSQ, including Lima Site 36. None afforded the desired coverage, and in the wake of the communist offensive none could be considered secure. Then on March 31, President Johnson halted the bombing of North Vietnam above the 20th parallel, thereby negating the need for such a site. General Momyer and Ambassador Sullivan agreed to reexamine the site problem should bombing resume.[29]

The consequences of the battle were even more severe for the Meo. According to the embassy:

> The fall of Phou Phathi . . . opens a new time of troubles for Vang Pao and the Meos of Military Region II. The size of the attacking forces and their heavy supporting weapons are greater than anything friendly troops can muster in the immediate vicinity. Therefore, there is no alternative but to evacuate friendly troop units and their dependents in order to maintain them intact to counterattack activities in the rainy season.[30]

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25. Debriefing rprt, [redacted] at Site 85, n.d. [ca Mar 12, 1968].
26. *Ibid.*
27. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130750Z Mar 68.
28. Hist, 56th ACW, Jan–Jun 68, p 37.
29. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 7592, 031030Z Jul 68.
30. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 5136, 140841Z Mar 68.

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Before this, the communists were content to drive off the Meo soldiers, take over the area for a while, then withdraw to their own bases. The size of the 1968 offensive, however, made it clear the North Vietnamese Army meant to control the area. Because the Meo would not fight without their families, the embassy had no choice but to evacuate.

Many of the Meo were able to walk out with a few meager possessions. Thousands more were flown out by a fleet of Air America helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. This vast uprooting of humanity placed a tremendous strain on the United States Agency for International Development. By June, over 150,000 refugees choked the relief centers set up around the Plain of Jars. Eventually most of these families were resettled around Long Tieng. This exodus of Meo families denied the enemy a source of recruits and laborers, but it also dried up the Meo "ocean" in the northeast in which the progovernment guerrillas could "swim." Henceforth, they would have to operate on far more conventional lines, an ill-suited role that rendered them more independent than ever on USAF support.

The fall of Lima Site 85 further engendered rather bitter recriminations between the embassy/CIA and Seventh Air Force. General Momyer wrote Sullivan on March 14 regarding "the need for a postmortem analysis." Precisely, the general wanted to know "how a relatively small force was able to take such an allegedly well-defended installation." Clearly implied was criticism of the embassy's intelligence, planning, and targeting.[31]

The ambassador naturally resented these charges. He averred it had never been the intent to hold the site against a major attack. He said total PL/NVA forces in the area outnumbered the defenders and that embassy estimates of enemy capabilities and intentions proved correct. When it came to showing what the embassy had done in response to these indications, however, the ambassador's arguments fell somewhat flat. Ground defense was the Meo's responsibility, he noted, ignoring the fact that the Meo were under embassy/CIA control. Sullivan tried to turn the tables by putting the blame on the Air Force which, he contended, had not furnished adequate and timely air support.[32]

Seventh Air Force reminded Sullivan that over a thousand sorties had been flown in defense of the site. Every target nominated by the embassy had been hit, though not necessarily at the time or in the strength desired. Moreover, these targets often proved to be of marginal value, and the embassy had neglected to bring USAF planners into its confidence as the battle unfolded.[33] This controversy smoldered through the spring of 1968 without any real resolution.

Meantime, the Lima Site 85 survivors voiced their own complaint. They claimed that neither the embassy nor the Air Force had properly looked after their safety. These allegations reached all the way back to Washington and prompted a USAF investigation of the details surrounding the loss of Site 85. The investigators found no negligence on the part of the embassy or Seventh Air Force. They did conclude, however, that the entire episode clearly demonstrated that both had a long way to go in forging an effective air/ground team in Laos. As General Momyer observed during a farewell visit to the ambassador, "We ought to be able to do better."[34]

On the positive side, the Site 85 controversy focused high-level attention on the need for air support in northern Laos. The Joint Chiefs of Staff directed Admiral Sharp on May 15 to get with Sullivan and "determine the requirements for U.S. Air Force support of RLG counterinsurgency operations." In reply, CINCPAC dusted off the earlier USAF proposal to add two A–1 squadrons of twenty-five aircraft each, increase the A–26s from twelve to sixteen and

31. Msg, 7th AF (Gen Momyer) to AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan), 141245Z Mar 68.
32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to 7th AF, 161100Z Mar 68.
33. Msg, 7th AF to AmEmb Vientiane, 141246Z Mar 68; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLIV, 2–4.
34. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 7592, 031020Z Jul 68; see note 20; intvw, author with Lt Col Edward Vallentiny, Sep 15, 1967; testimony, Maj Stanley J. Sliz, in JCS Laos File 52–70.

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the C–123s from six to ten, and to eliminate the T–28s. The JCS endorsed this proposal on June 17 and on August 21 Secretary McNamara approved these forces for inclusion in the fiscal year 1969 deployment package.[35] At last Sullivan was getting the aircraft, if not the control he desired.

The twin disasters of Nam Bac and Phou Phathi fostered a degree of "togetherness" among the Laotian generals. As Ambassador Sullivan saw it:

> There was no panic . . ., more an air of worry, perhaps even fatalism. . . . In this extreme crisis the generals have agreed to bury the hatchet and there is an apparent willingness to work together—at least for right now.[36]

During the week of March 11–16, 1968, the generals met several times with Souvanna. Between the sessions, the prime minister consulted frequently with the ambassador. At the final meeting, attended by Sullivan and key members of his staff, the Laotians consented to implement their long awaited reorganization. They also asked that the army be reequipped and assented to an expanded bombing campaign in Samneua Province.[37]

Special details of the bombing campaign were left to be worked out between the embassy and Seventh Air Force. For their part, the Laotians opened up a number of targets and areas previously off limits. The rules of engagement were changed accordingly, and both the army the and Meo said they would improve their targeting. Reequipping the FAR was turned over to the deputy chief, and to assist him the FAR general staff standardized all battalions at 666 men.[38]

More important was the internal army reorganization, directed by Souvanna Phouma on May 4. The principal effect of this action was the emergence of the young American-trained colonels and the decline of the "troika" that had run the FAR since the overthrow of Phoumi Nosavan. The general staff was taken out from under Ouane Rathikone and integrated into the defense ministry, giving Souvanna more control over military operations. Ouane kept his position as commander in chief, but with no real influence. The deputy commander in chief positions were abolished as were the tactical headquarters for north and south Laos. This drew the military region commanders directly under FAR headquarters in Vientiane. Several older generals were shifted to positions of prestige, but little real power, while direct control of the troops passed to younger men such as Col. (Thao) Ly Liddhiluja and the "fighting generals," Vang Pao and Phasouk Somly.[39]

In spite of its efforts at Nam Bac, the first part of 1968 had not been auspicious for the RLAF. Besides military defeats, the series of internal problems buffeting the air force caused the sortie rate to dip to its lowest point since the Thao Ma coup. On January 1, the air force had undergone another reorganization, further decentralizing control. Major changes included abolishing the Tactical Air Command and Air Transport Command and establishing composite squadrons at each of the four main airfields (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Pakse). Under this setup, the squadron commander reported to the base commander, who in turn reported to the military region commander rather than to the RLAF.[40] In consequence, each military region (except Vang Pao's Military Region II) had its own private air force, command was diffused, and promotion came from political patronage instead of military competence. The

35. Msgs, JCS to CINCPAC, 152301Z May 68, subj: Tactical Air Support in Laos, CINCPAC to JCS, 020247Z Apr 68, subj: Air Support in Laos; hist, CINCPAC, 1968, p 199.
36. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 161100Z Mar 68.
37. Ltr, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: The Week of the Generals in Vientiane, Mar 24, 1968.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Journal of Military Assistance*, Jun 68, p 105.
40. DDIIR 1 856 0001 68, Jan 5, 1968, p 2.

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army wanted to make sure no officer, not even the docile General Sourith, would be able to exercise control over the entire force. In the words of one officer: "After Ma left, we tried to divide the T–28s so they would not be one group. One group was too powerful."[41]

One outcome of the reorganization was that each of the squadrons took on individual characteristics. In Military Region I, for example, the role of the squadron was primarily defensive, assisting the army to hold established positions. At Vientiane the Laotian squadron, [redacted] gave offensive and defensive support to Vang Pao's guerrillas. The squadron at Savannakhet worked with both guerrilla and regular army units. At Pakse the squadron's operation was much the same as in Military Region I—defensive support for ground troops in a static position.[42] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

The reorganization presented few problems to the young pilots. On the other hand, many senior officers had their families and private interests in one location and they were not about to move without a struggle. One RLAF commander said the main reason these officers refused to move was that "they were involved in corruption at their present locations."[43] Inasmuch as assignments hinged largely on political patronage, there was little Sourith could do. Commenting on this problem, Colonel Pettigrew, air attaché, added:

> Some of the conversation with General Sourith is quoted directly, even though it appears rather elementary, to show how little authority, control and power he really exerts over RLAF personnel. Note that he uses the term "ask" instead of "tell" or "order."[44]

Part of the problem was the general reluctance of Laotians, at all levels and in all elements of society, to give direct orders. An air operations center commander explained: "One thing the Laotians won't do is to tell anyone to do something. They consider it bad manners."[45] Ultimately, most of these senior officers did assume their new posts, but several were to make trouble for Sourith and the Americans.

The reorganization had its positive aspects. If a base commander turned out to be a competent officer, the new arrangement yielded greater efficiency; if not, the effects could be disastrous. For example, at Luang Prabang the base commander was Maj. (Prince) Mangkhala Souvanna Phouma, eldest son of the prime minister. Mangkhala worked closely with Major Leuschner, the AOC commander, enabling the squadron to perform outstandingly during the battle for Nam Bac. In contrast, the base commanders at Vientiane and Savannakhet were deeply involved in smuggling, a situation that was to have international repercussions. (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

Another potentially disruptive event occurred on January 22, 1968, when the first two Meo completed pilot training at Udorn. For some time, Vang Pao had been dissatisfied with RLAF support. For one thing, the pilots were not inclined to assist the Meo, whom they looked upon as mere savages. Nor were the other military region commanders willing to share their resources with a possible rival. [redacted] pilots continued to fly but their performance declined in direct proportion to the stiffening of enemy air defenses.

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Shortly after the Thao Ma coup of October 1966 Vang Pao started pushing for his own squadron—after all, every other military region commander had one. Colonel Pettigrew opposed the idea as did the RLAF, but with strong CIA backing Vang Pao prevailed. The first three pilot candidates received six months of English language training, then 150 hours of instruction

41. [redacted] Intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Lt Col Khouang, RLAF, Wg Comdr, Pakse, Jun 12, 1970.
42. [redacted] DDIIR 1 856 0001 68, Jan 5, 1968, p 2.
43. [redacted] DDIIR 1 856 0005 68, Jan 22, 1968, p 2.
44. [redacted] *Ibid.*
45. [redacted] Intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Norman D. Munsey and 1st Lt Stephen H. Reich, AOC Luang Prabang, Jul 17, 1970.

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in a [redacted] Piper PA–18. When the three arrived at Water Pump, they were far ahead of the others. Still, only two completed the T–28 transition course and one of these crashed soon after graduation. The sole survivor, Ly Lee (one of Vang Pao's many sons-in-law), was given a provisional commission in the RLAF to become permanent in one year. He was assigned to Luang Prabang but shortly secured a transfer to the newly formed squadron at Vientiane where he was subsequently joined by six more Meo. Before long, Ly Lee was the de facto commander of a Meo squadron that staged out of Long Tieng, taking orders straight from Vang Pao.[46]

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(S) The debut of the Meo created a good deal of dismay within the air force. While conceding the Meo's flying skill, they still looked down on them as social inferiors. "Personally, I like to fly with them," one pilot said, "but you must understand that they are different from us."[47] A second problem was that the Meo were never truly under RLAF control. They worked for and were paid by General Vang Pao.[48] Nevertheless, they were a vital asset in the coming campaigns.

(S) Military defeats and internal upheaval in the early months of 1968 eroded RLAF morale. Having lost six aircraft in the futile action to save Nam Bac, many of the pilots wondered if it was worth it. Why push themselves and their aircraft? All around them inefficiency and corruption flourished, while no one in authority seemed to suffer. Colonel Pettigrew pointed out:

> These aircrews are now believed to be among those supporting top military leaders engaged in illegal drug traffic. They are not subject to being exposed to enemy fire and are very likely becoming richer for their effort.[49]

(S) As if to punctuate Pettigrew's words, an RLAF C–47 took off from Savannakhet on March 21 ostensibly bound for Vientiane. Aboard were the base commanders from Vientiane and Savannakhet along with Captain Chathasone, the U.S. trained T–28 commander at Savannakhet. Inside was a cargo of gold and opium, its destination—Saigon.[50]

(S) Just before takeoff, General Sourith asked Col. Eugene P. Sonnenberg, the assistant air attaché, to give the pilot a letter addressed to the Laotian attaché in Saigon. Suspecting something was afoot, Sonnenberg had the letter steamed open. Inside was a full description of the cargo and instructions for its disposition. Sonnenberg resealed the letter, delivered it to the pilot, and notified American authorities in Vientiane and Saigon.[51]

(S) When the plane touched down in Saigon, it was met by South Vietnamese officials who impounded the aircraft, cargo, and crew. Diplomatic negotiations secured the release of the plane and crew, but the matter acutely embarrassed the Laotian government.[52]

(S) The two base commanders were reduced in rank but neither was relieved of his command. Captain Chathasone was grounded but resumed flying in time to distinguish himself during the Houei Mun campaign. He later confided to Colonel Pettigrew that the incident was his first mistake and he did not intend to repeat it. In Pettigrew's words, "When he stated that this was his first big error, I am not certain what he really meant—getting involved or getting caught!"[53]

(S) As if these troubles were not enough, even the elements seemed to conspire against the RLAF. On March 24 a freak tornado struck Vientiane (a symbol of Buddha's displeasure, in the eyes of the local bonzes), destroying three T–28s. Fortunately, replacement aircraft were already

46. (S) DDIIR 1 856 0020 68, Feb 23, 1968; intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Col Eugene P. Sonnenberg, Asst AIRA Vientiane, May 28, 1970.
47. (S) Concy intvw, Jun 15–16, 1970.
48. (S) DDIIR 1 856 0020 68, Feb 23, 1968.
49. (S) DDIIR 1 856 0032 68, Mar 20, 1968.
50. (S) DDIIR 1 856 0040 68, Apr 5, 1968.
51. (S) Sonnenberg intvw, May 28, 1970.
52. (S) DDIIR 1 856 0040 68, Apr 5, 1968.
53. (S) DDIIR 1 856 0070 68, Jun 6, 1968.

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on the way. As the result of Nam Bac, Ambassador Sullivan had asked on February 27 for the immediate delivery of twelve T–28s. CINCPAC and Air Force headquarters approved the request, the first four planes arriving at Udorn on March 11 and the remaining eight on April 10. An amazingly swift reaction.[54]

The first part of 1968 also saw the Raven forward air controller program put on a solid footing. In March, the 504th Tactical Air Support Group was tasked to furnish twelve pilots on a regular basis for duty as Ravens. Pilots picked for the program were supposed to be volunteers, show sixty days experience as a FAC in South Vietnam, and have at least six months left on their tours in Southeast Asia.[55] In practice, the sole requirement was to be a volunteer and be willing to spend six months in Laos.[56]

The selected pilots were assigned to the Water Pump detachment, where they received a cursory briefing before departing for Vientiane. As a rule, about half the Ravens were stationed at Long Tieng with one or two in each of the other military regions. Even so, the Ravens were often shifted from one base to another depending on where the heaviest fighting was.[57]

In Laos, the Ravens came under the nominal control of the air attaché and used the same cover story as other American military personnel.[58] The control from Vientiane turned out to be tenuous. The Ravens lived in the field with the troops they assisted and soon came to identify with them. In particular, the Ravens at Long Tieng identified with General Vang Pao. It was not uncommon for the Meo general to invite one or two of the Ravens to his house for dinner each night. There, they talked over the day's events and planned the next day's activities. The close rapport between FAC and ground commander greatly enhanced the quality of close air support. At the same time, it led to frequent charges that the Long Tieng Ravens worked for Vang Pao and not the Air Force.[59]

Flying three or four missions a day in the same area, the Ravens quickly achieved a reputation as the best FACs in Laos. But their disregard for paperwork, military protocol, and standardized procedures was notorious. General Brown, Seventh Air Force commander, said, "The Ravens are our best FACs, but command and control is loose."[60] There were numerous attempts to "regularize" the Ravens over the years, but they were successfully resisted by a succession of air attachés, who felt the fluid situation in Laos dictated the highest in individual initiative and the least centralized control.[61]

Having resolved the personnel problem, the question of finding a suitable aircraft remained. The Ravens were flying a variety of planes borrowed from the RLAF, owned by the air attaché or in some cases by Air America, or on loan from the 23d Tactical Air Support Squadron at Nakhon Phanom. When Colonel Pettigrew requested permanent manning for the Raven program, he also stated a requirement for ten or eleven aircraft properly configured for FAC operations. He had in mind either the U–10 or U–17, for both were high wing, carried four passengers, and had the power to operate from the short Laotian airstrips.[62] Neither plane was

54. *Journal of Military Assistance*, Apr 68, p 109.
55. Msg, CINCPACAF to AIRA Vientiane, 202158Z Mar 68, subj: FAC Support; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.
56. Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Capt Karl L. Polifka, Jr., Dec 17, 1974, p 6.
57. *Ibid*; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.
58. The cover story changed from time to time but fooled no one. In October 1970, cover stories were dropped completely after the United States government officially acknowledged the presence of American military personnel in Laos.
59. Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Capt Karl L. Polifka, Jr., Dec 17, 1974, p 6; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.
60. Transcript, Udorn Conference, Sep 9, 1968, p 37.
61. Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, p 22.
62. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 220530Z Nov 67, subj: FAC Support.

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readily available through the Military Assistance Program. As a substitute, the Air Force offered the O–1s excess to the USAF units that had converted to the O–2 and OV–10. Pettigrew was not eager to have O–1s because they lacked the requisite power and endurance. In the end he accepted them, since they were available and properly configured.[63]

Many of these O–1 castoffs were barely flyable. Pettigrew therefore arranged with Air America to recondition and in some instances to rebuild the O–1s. Air America was also awarded a contract to perform periodic maintenance after every hundred hours of flying time. However, the strict limitation on American military personnel in Laos precluded assignment of maintenance men to the forward bases where they could do routine maintenance between trips to the Air America facility at Udorn. Hence, the Ravens took care of their own planes with little more than a wrench and a screwdriver. This procedure proved inadequate and the failure to afford routine maintenance was to have serious consequences before the close of 1968.[64]

The defeats in early 1968 imposed new strains on Laos' fragile government. With the regular forces in disarray, the government's survival rested more than ever on the Meo and U.S. Air Force. They had to hold off the North Vietnamese who were even then knocking on the door of Na Khang (Lima Site 36), a major Meo salient.

Situated on a low plateau about three hundred feet above sea level, Na Khang was far more exposed than Lima Site 85. The plateau dropped abruptly on the west, but to the east, a gentle slope allowed easy access. Since August 1965, USAF helicopters had used the site's 2,200-foot dirt strip as a forward staging area for search and rescue operations in North Vietnam and Barrel Roll. The enemy's seizure of the site in February 1966 turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory; and a year later, the communists suffered a bloody repulse due in large measure to timely USAF support. By the final week in April 1968, an estimated eight or nine enemy battalions had arrived in the vicinity with four or five of them poised for a third try. Vang Pao had accordingly reinforced the garrison to fifteen hundred men (about the size of the attacking force), while the Air Force and Central Intelligence Agency firmed up a joint contingency plan for its defense. Unlike Lima Site 85 preparations, the Air Force was brought in on the initial planning stages; and perhaps as a result of the criticism over Site 85, there was close contact throughout the ensuing battle.

One sign of USAF sensitivity was the meticulous record kept of every exchange [redacted] and every sortie flown in support of the site. For its part, [redacted] also seemed to be bending over backward to keep the Air Force informed and to meet every objection or suggestion. Both parties were apparently determined that if the site should fall, no blame could be attached to them. (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

From April 24 to May 4, action was limited to preliminary skirmishing as each side felt out the other's strengths and weaknesses. Air Force operations were likewise low, ten sorties a day being flown. Targeting, however, was noticeably improved as both forward air controllers and ground forces actively sought out enemy positions. Even so, the communists were ready to mount a major assault on May 5. An excerpt from the Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force tactical air control center log gives a vivid account of the opening of that attack, and is indicative of the type of coordination that characterized the complete battle:

> 05/0216 [redacted] advises undetermined number of enemy attacking two outposts east of L–36. Checked on resources, all Nimrods [A–26] airborne. Passed info to Lt Col Morrow [7AF] to approve sending flare ship. He will wake Gen officer for Nimrod divert. (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)
>
> 05/0235 [redacted] advises one outpost lost. Vang Pao counters with 105mm howitzer fire. Needs support wx 80 0 DZL. (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

ALL CHA

63. Working Paper, AIRA Vientiane, n.d. [ca Nov 67]; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.
64. Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974; Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.

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05/0237 Bluechip [7AF Command Post] approved divert of Lamplighter 02 [C–123] and Nimrod 40 to L–36. (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

05/0340 Nimrod 40 RTB—low fuel. Lamp 02 still flaring.

05/0400 [redacted] says second outpost fallen. Talked to Morrow. Will try to divert two flights of F–4s to LS–36 [sic]. Also entire BR package will be diverted to L–36.

05/0540 B/Chip delay L–36 strike package due to forecast weather. (7007) Got permission for Firefly 11/12 [2 A–1s] to launch ASAP and 13/14 as originally scheduled.

05/0715 Gen Vang Pao requests max air at L–36 this PM. He specifically requests napalm. He has spotted enemy troops who are dug in near L–36 and feels we could do real good. Relayed to Lt Col Park [7AF] recommendation for eight A–1s as divert. He requests target validation and request from Laotian ambassador so he can sell it to Gen Sweat. Could not get AirA. Passed to Gen Lindley [7/13 AF Commander] and Col Boles [7/13 AF DO].

05/1230 Validation received from AirA. Strike package laid on. Following added resources provided, two F–4 TOT 1315, two F–105 TOT 1330.[65]

That afternoon, seventeen A–1s (plus the F–4s and F–105s) struck seven targets furnished by General Vang Pao with "excellent" results. At five in the evening, [redacted] the enemy apparently massing for another attack, and asked for a strike package for the next day like that just provided. Seventh Air Force replied it would schedule thirty-five sorties a day as long as necessary. Since this was the whole Barrel Roll package, Seventh Air Force requested and received confirmation that this requirement took priority over all other strikes in northern Laos.[66] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

The aircraft arrived at first light on May 6 and worked all day. During much of this time, Vang Pao was airborne with a Raven FAC, personally directing strikes and coordinating ground operations. The general later reported he was elated with USAF support and the air strikes were among the finest he had witnessed. Especially notable was a napalm run against one group of enemy soldiers. Following the strike, Vang Pao saw several of the communists rolling on the ground with their clothes on fire. Afterwards, a patrol found the charred remains of seventeen bodies. On May 7, the story was much the same with the PL/NVA unable to make any headway. By that evening, it appeared that the tide had begun to turn. [redacted] passed a "well done" to Seventh Air Force, the 56th Air Commando Wing, and the 602d Fighter Squadron Commando, adding that "the A–1 A/C [aircraft] in particular have demonstrated TACAIR at its best in defense of LS–36 on 6 and 7 May."[67] There was no letup in air activity. During May 5–13 the Air Force flew 276 sorties, virtually wiping out the attacking force. (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

Taking advantage of these air strikes, the Meo on May 10 began pushing out to the north and east. As they advanced, they uncovered more targets that were promptly hit. Instead of waiting hours or days before following up these strikes, the Meo moved in at once before the enemy had a chance to recover. Thus, they swiftly retook all of their outposts and forced the communists back some four to five miles by May 13. Here both sides paused for breath. By agreement [redacted] sorties were cut back to ten A–1s a day and one A–26 at night, this being deemed sufficient to keep the present balance. If conditions worsened, Seventh Air Force stood ready to enlarge the sorties as needed.[68] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

The allies had won the first round but the communists still posed a threat to Lima Site 36. Ambassador Sullivan figured it was but a matter of time before they resumed their attack and proposed using B–52s to smash the enemy's staging areas.[69] A few days later, Souvanna

ALL CIA

65. Log, TACC 7th AF/13th AF, May 5, 1969.
66. Msgs, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 051030Z May 68, subj: Lima Site 36 Sitrep and Air Strike Request, 7th AF to AIRA Vientiane, 051100Z May 68, subj: Air Strike Request.
67. Memo, 4802d JLD to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Additional LS–36 BDA, May 7, 1968.
68. Memo, 4802d JLD to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: LS–36, May 13, 1968.
69. In January 1968, during the battle of Lima Site 85, Sullivan had opposed a similar suggestion by General

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broached the subject himself and was assured by the ambassador that Washington was weighing the matter. Actually, the authorities in Washington had already made up their minds. Either they did not share Sullivan's appreciation of the situation or felt introducing B–52s might jeopardize the Paris peace talks. On May 16, they firmly thumbed down the idea and advised the ambassador he would have to make do with the tactical air support at hand. However, the Joint Chiefs of Staff did direct Admiral Sharp to provide all other tactical air sorties Sullivan needed.[70]

Indeed, the additional sorties would soon be demanded. Although four enemy battalions had been badly mauled in the first attack on Lima Site 36, at least four more in reserve had been committed to the battle. The CIA thought the attack would begin on May 20, and plans made accordingly, with a list compiled of twenty-four first-priority and twenty-three second-priority targets. Sixty sorties a day were scheduled on these targets for three days starting on May 20, drawing down Seventh Air Force operations in other areas. Seventh insisted the sorties be used solely against the designated targets or more lucrative ones nearby.[71] In the face of this blitz, the foe mustered only a weak thrust on the twentieth. This assault rapidly ran down, and by the twenty-fourth the attackers had been forced back to their starting positions. On May 27, the communists abandoned the siege and a jubilant ambassador cabled Seventh Air Force, "Wish to express my deep appreciation to you and your organization for your excellent response . . . in the defense of Site 36."[72] As the foe withdrew, Vang Pao began a cautious advance back towards Lima Site 85, but his own troops were too tired to do more than harass the retreating enemy.

Meanwhile, the raging Tet offensive on the other side of the border in South Vietnam was being felt in southern Laos. For years, ground operations in southern Laos had been limited. The North Vietnamese seemed content to secure their hold on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the FAR was not inclined to interfere. Elsewhere the Pathet Lao and FAR sparred inconclusively, neither side seriously challenging the other; but in early 1968, the war heated up. This may have been due in part to North Vietnamese efforts to expand the trail network farther to the west to reduce the effect of U.S. bombing. However, the intense and widespread enemy actions suggest it was also part of the general Tet offensive.

Communist operations in the south had gotten under way on December 11, 1967. A mixed Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese force, variously estimated as between fifty men and two battalions, attacked the village of Lao Ngam. The defenders, consisting of two companies and four howitzers, withdrew about a half mile while the enemy occupied the northern end of the airfield for around twenty-four hours before withdrawing.[73]

On December 12, two North Vietnamese battalions and several Pathet Lao companies overran a government position only ten miles north of Saravane. At about the same time, another enemy force virtually surrounded Attopeu but made no move to take the town.[74]

Then, during the early morning hours of Christmas Day, two Pathet Lao battalions (the 14th and 18th) swept over the tacan site at Muong Phalane. They achieved complete surprise, chasing the partially clad FAR commander into the woods. Two USAF technicians along with one Philippine and three Thai employees of Air America were killed and the tacan was

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Westmoreland as "unwarranted escalation." The ambassador's turnabout may have mirrored the profound effect of the PL/NVA offensive on the war.

70. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130640Z May 68, subj: Site 36—Arclight, 161106Z May 68, subj: Arclight, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 161223Z May 68, subj: Additional Air Support for Site 36, JCS to CINCPAC, 162303Z May 68, subj: Air Support Site 36.

71. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF, 180505Z May 68, subj: Special Strike Package, Site 36, 7th AF to AIRA Vientiane, subj: Special Strike Package, Site 36, May 19, 1968.

72. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb Sullivan) to 7th AF (Gen Momyer), 6770, 271150Z May 68.

73. Weekly Laotian SITREP, 7th AF/13th AF, Dec 14, 1967. That the PL/NVA did not try to occupy the entire site suggests the lower estimate of the number of attackers is probably closer to the mark.

74. Weekly Laotian SITREP, 7th AF/13th AF, Dec 14, 1967.

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demolished. The charred remains of one of the Americans was later found inside the tacan facility. The Air America radio station was also damaged and an Agency for International Development building was burned to the ground. Later that morning, an Air America helicopter seeking to reconnoiter the area was shot down but its crew was recovered. On December 29, a hastily assembled force led personally by Brig. Gen. Kot Venevongsos, Military Region III commander, reoccupied the site with no resistance.

The tacan's loss dealt a serious blow to USAF operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, since the set was expected to play a key role in the recently established Muscle Shoals program.[75] A team from the 1st Mobile Communications Group was hurriedly flown to the site to see if the tacan could be reestablished. They found, however, that the tacan and most of its supporting equipment had been damaged beyond repair. Inasmuch as Muong Phalane was no longer secure, a new location had to be chosen for the replacement set. After reviewing several locations, it was decided to put the new site at Mukdahan, Thailand, right across the river from Savannakhet. By January 10, 1968, this new set was in place and operating.[76]

A month later, the North Vietnamese eliminated the last vestige of RLG presence along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a single battalion that had been holed up in the nearby village of Ban Houei Sane since the fall of Tchepone in the early 1960s. They stayed in relative peace, periodically resupplied by Air America helicopters, observing enemy actions but making no move to interfere. Finally the North Vietnamese decided to remove even this minor annoyance. On January 23, 1968, three battalions supported by seven tanks hit the outpost. The North Vietnamese were en route to Khe Sanh, and Ban Houei Sane just happened to be in the way.

When helicopter evacuation failed, the Laotians beat a hasty retreat across the border into South Vietnam. The NVA pursued and more fighting flared around the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei, South Vietnam. Eventually, 113 men were lifted by helicopter to Da Nang and returned afterward to Savannakhet. The rest of the defenders split up and tried to make their way back on foot, but a mere handful ultimately reached friendly territory in February and March.[77]

To counter this burgeoning enemy activity, the Air Force in February began an air campaign against PL/NVA staging areas near Mahaxay. Although nominally a part of the interdiction campaign, it appears this particular operation was pointed more toward boosting FAR morale that had been badly shaken by the communist offensive.[78] The campaign lifted morale but FAR and CIA reports revealed it did little real damage to the enemy.

Indeed, the communists in late February renewed their attacks on Saravane, Lao Ngam, Attopeu, and Muong Phalane. Lao Ngam held but Muong Phalane fell. The Saravane defenders were driven into the town and it was doubtful they could withstand a sizable assault. Reinforcements were flown into Attopeu but the town remained surrounded and subject to capture almost at will.

In Vientiane, the prime minister voiced fears that the communists were making a long-expected bid to control all of southern Laos. Recognizing his military impotence, Souvanna made a desperate plea to the International Control Commission. The demarche was led by the RLG deputy foreign minister who presented a North Vietnamese defector as proof of the communist aggression. Over the objections of the Poles, the ICC consented to send a team to Saravane, but the Indian chairman advised Souvanna that the Poles were bearing down on the Indian government to forestall any permanent ICC pressure in southern Laos. The chairman said he favored an enlarged role for the ICC but under the circumstances he hoped Souvanna would "understand" his

75. An air-supported antivehicular and antipersonnel system using acoustic and seismic sensors. Later renamed Igloo White.
76. Hist, 1st Mbl Comm Gp, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1968, pp 42–44.
77. Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968, pp 31–33.
78. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 200546Z Jan 68.

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position and not push too hard. Souvanna responded by issuing a public warning that, if the communists captured a major city (Saravane or Attopeu), he would have to ask for outside intervention. At about the same time, the Thai government warned that any communist advance to the Mekong River would draw regular Thai forces into the war.[79]

Whether these diplomatic moves did any good is difficult to determine, but in any case, the communists did not press their attacks. They did mount a minor probe against Thakhek on March 11, doing scarcely more than panicking the civilian population. The FAR commander who ordered an indiscriminate artillery bombardment damaged the civilians more than the enemy. He apparently wanted the communists to know he had artillery on hand.[80]

By early May, the enemy had eased up enough to allow a small FAR offensive at Houei Mun northwest of Saravane. The operation's outcome was modest and probably of less importance than the method used. Past failures to take the area were due chiefly to the same absence of planning and coordination that distinguished the Nam Bac debacle. This time the operation was turned over to Ly Liddhiluja, commander of GM 21 and one of the young American-trained colonels. Ly's selection was most fortunate because he possessed the ability and charisma to get the most from his men and resources.

On May 18, Ly called a meeting at his headquarters to plan the operation. Attending were his own staff, the air attaché, the Army attaché, [redacted] and, for the first time, the T–28 commander, Captain Chathasone, who had just recently been restored to flying status. During this meeting every aspect of the forthcoming operation was worked out in detail, including logistics, communications, and a tactical air support plan. In previous operations, this attention to detail had been sorely missing. Each unit received a code name and air/ground radios. To identify friendly units, alternating colored flares were to be used on different days, backed up by a colored panel system. Colonel Ly personally briefed the participating units and the T–28s pilots on their roles, engendering a team spirit and sense of commitment that were sustained through the offensive.

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The general scheme of maneuver was to have the ground forces locate, fix, and identify enemy forces to be destroyed by air strikes. The ground troops would then rush in at once before the enemy had a chance to recover. A significant departure from the prior FAR "blockhouse" approach to war, the Meo had successfully employed this tactic at Lima Site 36 earlier in May. It was, in fact, the standard tactic of the PL/NVA, but they used artillery in lieu of aircraft to soften up strongpoints.

During the operation (May 19–28), Ly set up his command post in the Savannakhet air operations center where he was in constant touch with his American advisors and could keep continuously abreast of the air/ground battle. He personally briefed and debriefed every RLAF mission and visited each of his units by helicopter daily, giving praise or criticism as deserved. This attention and concern by the senior commander marked one more departure from former FAR procedures. The individual soldiers responded with more aggressiveness than Laotian troops usually displayed.

The RLAF flew four missions a day, with planes taking off at eight and ten in the morning and one and three in the afternoon. These missions afforded air cover for the advancing troops until enemy targets were identified. Then the T–28s would swoop in to deliver their ordnance ahead of the friendly units. This was one of the few times the RLAF performed a true close air support role, adding to the motivation of the ground units and imparting a sense of worthwhile participation to the pilots. Besides their daylight resupply duties, the Laotian C–47s acted as flareships at night. In all the RLAF flew eighty-three sorties during the operation, with results

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79. [redacted]

80. Ferrari EOTR, May 27, 1968, pp 31–33; hist sum, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, Jun 66–Apr 68, pp 42–43.

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described as "outstanding" by all participants. The Air Force flew an additional sixteen sorties against targets in the foe's rear areas.

Enemy resistance throughout the operation was slight, the friendly forces losing only seven men killed. Communist losses were also light although there was ample evidence of hasty withdrawals. The major credit for these was given to the excellent T–28 coverage, for the communists chose to withdraw rather than stand and fight against the coordinated air/ground attack. The Laotians captured a number of arms caches and documents dealing with Pathet Lao units, leading to the arrest of several communist sympathizers. In lieu of punishing the sympathizers, Captain Chathasone ordered them "briefed on proper conduct" and released.

On May 29, the government forces entered Houei Mun and were welcomed as liberating heroes. The air attaché described the scene:

> During the victory celebration, they were waited on hand and foot by beautiful Laotian maidens who even held their glasses to their lips while they drank. Colonel Ly stated that the enemy ran from airstrikes and that the Pathet Lao had told local villagers that Americans were flying strike aircraft. Colonel Ly told villagers to look at Chathasone—a Laotian T–28 pilot—it was Laotian pilots that made the enemy run, not Americans.[81]

For his part in the operation, Ly was promoted to chief of staff of Military Region III; but Captain Chathasone was not promoted, due to his recent involvement in the opium smuggling incident.

The success at Houei Mun was a welcome relief to the earlier disasters of 1968. Its wider import, however, lay in the demonstration of how an effective mix of planning, targeting, coordination, and charismatic leadership could produce a successful air and ground operation. Unfortunately, this one example was lost in the sea of change that was engulfing the war in northern Laos.

By the summer of 1968, the four-year pattern of war in northern Laos was disrupted—permanently, as events were to prove. Since 1964, the conflict had featured a seasonal ebb and flow, marked by minor skirmishes and a minimum of direct USAF involvement. United States participation in this "quiet war" was normally confined to aid, clandestine activities, and indirect air support through the Royal Laotian Air Force. American policy sought no military victory but to prevent defeat until a solution could be reached in South Vietnam.

Among the many factors changing the complexion of the war in 1968 was the large infusion of North Vietnamese troops. By July, thirty thousand NVA soldiers were in the country, compared to twenty thousand Pathet Lao, a reversal of the figures of two years earlier. Formerly, regular North Vietnamese units had entered Laos for specific operations and had gone home. However, those that arrived in 1968 stayed. Fueled by this influx, the communist offensive erased many of the government's gains. The salients at Nam Bac and Phou Phathi were wiped out, major defeats were inflicted on the FAR and Meo, and the communists consolidated their control over the provinces of Phong Saly and Samneua. Between October 1967 and June 1968, government forces lost over three thousand men. The fall of Nam Bac virtually eliminated the FAR as an effective force, and the permanent loss of many lima sites severely curtailed the scope of General Vang Pao's operations. Finally, the rains were no longer an ally of the Royal Laotian Government because the North Vietnamese had built all-weather roads permitting them and their allies to carry on their offensive year-round.

The losses of 1968 generated pressures within the Laotian military, which passed to the government and from the prime minister to the American ambassador, then to Seventh Air Force. With the FAR supine and the Meo reduced to conventional operations, the United States again faced the dilemma of shoring up the Laotian government without openly abandoning the Geneva accords. The war in Laos was swiftly becoming a war for Laos.

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81. DDIIR 1 856 0068, Jun 4, 1968.

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The War in Northern Laos

[redacted] Within that country the "quiet war" had ended, while the war for survival had begun. Under these changed conditions, institutions and arrangements evolving during the early period no longer sufficed. New relationships were about to emerge—a rather painful process as it proved to be.

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[redacted]

Chapter XII

The Final Phase Begins (U)

[redacted] The year 1968 had opened disastrously for government forces in Laos. In particular, the defeats of Nam Bac and Lima Site 85 were severe physical and psychological blows. The loss of Nam Bac along with eleven battalions and $2.5 million worth of equipment had crippled the FAR and virtually wiped out government influence in the northwest. The fall of Site 85 eliminated a major USAF radar installation, removed the chief Meo stronghold in the northeast, and freed communist forces for operations against the Plain of Jars. Farther to the south, Muong Phalane had fallen, Saravane and Attopeu were isolated, and Thateng threatened. The successful defense of Lima Site 36 and the Houei Mun operation finally checked the enemy advance, but friendly forces were too exhausted for any counteroffensive. "Rainy season victories," Ambassador Sullivan noted, "are no bargain if the price is dry season defeats."[1]

[redacted] The RLAF, which had fought well, was likewise exhausted and demoralized, its top leadership riddled with inefficiency and corruption. Though personally honest, General Sourith had so far been unable—or unwilling—to curb the illicit traffic in gold and opium, and he had not furnished the dynamic leadership required to weld the RLAF into an effective fighting force.

[redacted] Conversely, communist forces held the strongest position they had attained since 1964. Their program of all-weather road construction let them resupply forward units even after the rains halted offensive operations. This and the government's inactivity during the summer of 1968 permitted the communists to keep all of the forward positions they had won during the dry season. They were, therefore, in an excellent position to press their advantage when major operations resumed in November. Hence the 1968 dry-season campaign, described by Ambassador Sullivan as "the worst I have seen in the four years I've been here," erased all of the government gains since 1964, upset the seasonal ebb and flow of fighting, and spelled the end of "the quiet war."[2]

[redacted] The first half of 1968 was equally traumatic for the Air Force. The USAF force structure that existed in June 1968 had been built primarily to bomb North Vietnam and to give close air support to American troops in South Vietnam. Operations in Laos were purely secondary. However, the Air Force was wrenched into a new posture and strategy in Southeast Asia by the Tet offensive and subsequent bombing halt over North Vietnam, and by the decision to disengage in South Vietnam and turn the bulk of the fighting over to the South Vietnamese. Henceforth, the Air Force would concentrate on interdicting the communist supply routes through southern Laos. This shift in focus inevitably affected operations in northern Laos and forced a reassessment of the USAF role there as well.

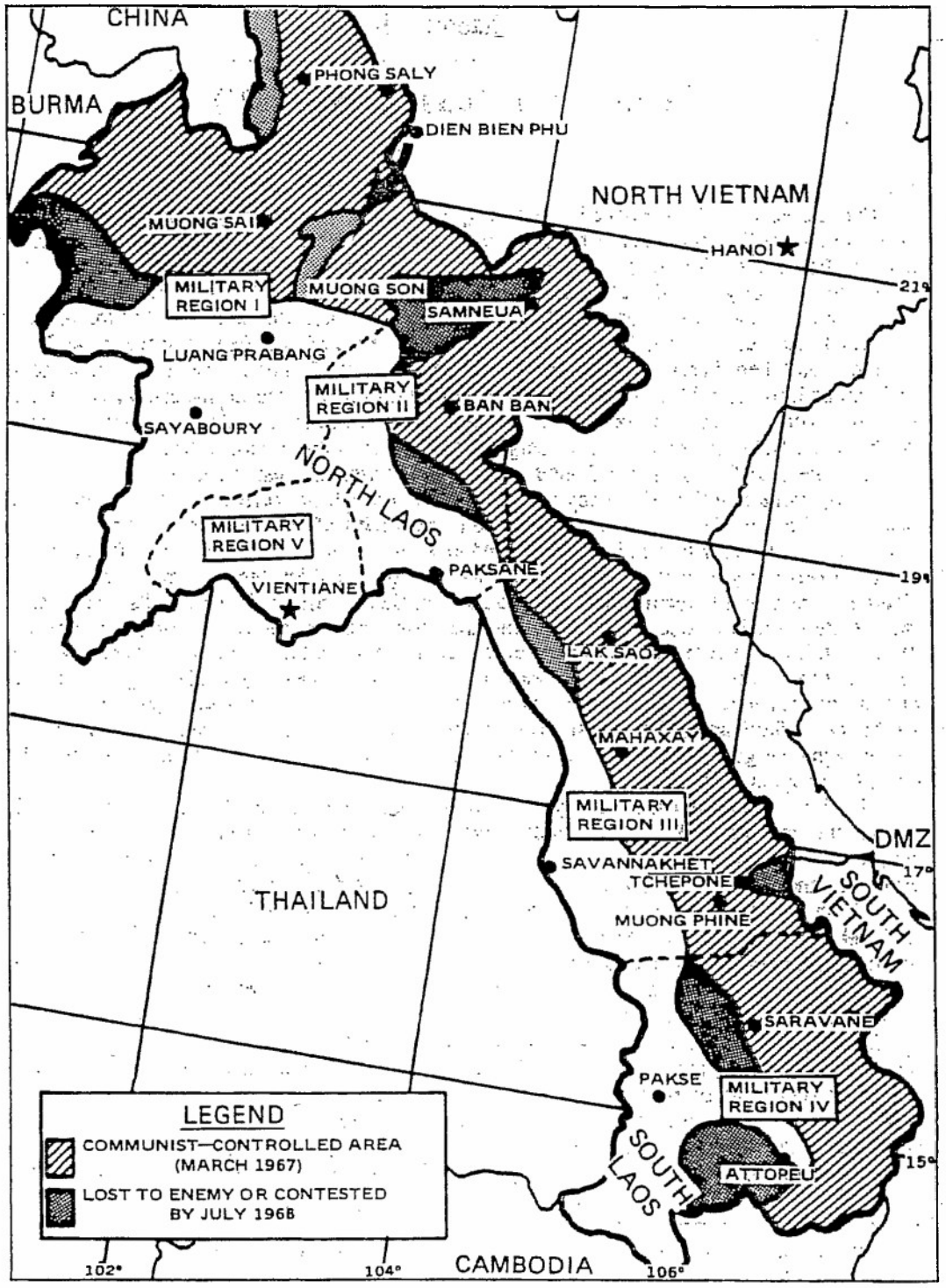
[redacted] For the embassy, too, the summer of 1968 was a time of sorting out, a time of reassessing its own programs. The communist offensive had completely upset plans, and new programs needed to be prepared to cope with the situation. Then, too, the annual rotation of U.S. personnel meant that a whole new set of relationships and responses would have to be developed. Out of this turmoil a partnership was finally forged that, however imperfect, culminated in the successful Operation About Face in August 1969. Although the results of

1. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 210541Z Jun 68, subj: Dry Season Wrap-Up.
2. [redacted] Transcript, Udorn Conference, Sep 9, 1968, p 14.

[redacted]

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About Face were transitory, they demonstrated how American air power could be combined with well-led indigenous forces to defeat a larger and better equipped enemy. On the other hand, the end of About Face also showed the limits that could be expected from such operations. (In the spring of 1970, the defense of Long Tieng would again prove the potency of air power in a defensive battle and set the pattern for the rest of the war.)

In June 1968, Col. Robert L. F. Tyrrell returned to Laos for his second tour as air attaché. He found there had been dramatic changes in Laos during the three years he had been away. The RLAF had degenerated into four minuscule air forces devoid of central direction, riddled with inefficiency and corruption, and flying fewer sorties than before. The attaché's office, which had grown in size and scope as the war expanded, was a hodgepodge of accredited attachés and augmentees on temporary duty from several different agencies. It was not always clear who was working for whom.[3]

Within the embassy, the widening role of the Central Intelligence Agency, in air as well as ground operations, inevitably drew it into conflict with the regular attachés. This had reached the point that Colonel Pettigrew's parting remark to Tyrrell was, "Don't buck the CIA or you will end up floating face down in the Mekong river."[4] Even though Pettigrew's warning was meant figuratively, it plumbed the depth of the problem. There was also a strain emerging between the Army and Air Force attachés. Colonel Law had gotten along well with both Tyrrell and Pettigrew, but his successor, Lt. Col. Edgar W. Duskin, almost at once crossed swords with Tyrrell over what Tyrrell felt was the Army attaché's efforts to expand his own role into the realm of air operations.[5]

The greatest change, however, was in the role of the United States Air Force. As the "quiet war" gave way to bigger and more conventional operations, USAF bombing came to be the salient characteristic of American involvement in northern Laos. It was bombing unlike that carried out elsewhere in Southeast Asia. In lieu of a separate air campaign or support of U.S. ground forces, USAF operations in northern Laos grew more and more wedded to support of an indigenous ground force—in this case the Meo—who were organized, equipped, and controlled outside the regular military establishment of either their own country or the United States. The novel setup severely strained the rather nebulous command structure in Laos, and in the end led Tyrrell into conflict with his own service.

In June 1968, all this lay in the future, and Tyrrell's immediate problem was rebuilding the RLAF. Ambassador Sullivan instructed the air attaché "to shape the RLAF into some type of cohesive fighting unit and establish a control system to prevent the use of transport aircraft for illicit traffic." Until this was done, the ambassador would not entertain any further expansion or procurement of additional aircraft.[6]

A few weeks later, Sullivan made the same point to the Laotian generals. Using Colonel Law's retirement party as a springboard, he informed his audience, consisting mostly of the Laotian high command, that he was shocked at the corruption among senior officers. Peace would come to Laos, he said, only after long and arduous negotiations and would most likely see a return to the old tripartite government. Under these conditions, he was concerned about the current government's ability to compete with the communists for the support of the people:

> To succeed, the government will have to make the sacrifices necessary to win the loyalties not only of the Lao elite but also of the simple peasants. In this struggle the role of the army will be critical. If the army, as a national institution, is respected and

3. Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, pp 7–14.
4. *Ibid*, pp 18–22; intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Col Robert L. F. Tyrrell, May 12, 1975, p 58.
5. Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, p 18.
6. *Ibid*, p 7.

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> admired by the population, the forces of nationalism will benefit. If the army is considered a source of abuse, corruption and exploitation, the communists will benefit.[7]

Brig. Gen. Oudone Sananikone, FAR Chief of Staff, cited the writings of Prof. Samuel Phillips Huntington of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard in his reply. Oudone (who had undergone U.S. Army staff training at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas) pointed out that the armed forces reflected Laotian society as a whole and was subject to the same clan and regional pressures. Maj. Gen. Kouprasith Abhay, Military Region V Commander, then took the floor and in a rambling forty-five-minute discourse traced the history of Laos back to 1946 and dwelt on the many sacrifices that had been made. Sullivan responded calmly that as far as he could see, the sacrifices were all coming from the GIs and not the generals; and in the future, he hoped to see more from the generals. At this point, the ambassador unlimbered his big guns. He said he had discussed the matter with both the king and the prime minister, who shared his alarm over corruption in high places and had asked his assistance in instituting tighter controls. As a first step, five C–47s scheduled for delivery to the RLAF would be held in Bangkok until the ambassador was assured the aircraft would be used solely for valid military requirements. Colonel Tyrrell would be personally responsible for setting up a control system.[8]

The audience was stunned. Never before had an ambassador intervened so directly in domestic affairs; but for the moment, Sullivan held most of the cards—or specifically, most of the airplanes.

Tyrrell unveiled his plan a week later. He would realign USAF personnel at RLAF bases to staff "a modified tactical air control system." Next, scheduling of all transports would be centralized in a combined operations center (COC). Lastly, a C–47 mobile training team would be formed to "upgrade" (i.e., supervise) transport pilots, mechanics, and radio operators. The ambassador enthusiastically—and the FAR reluctantly—approved the plan.[9]

To support the air control system, each AOC had to expand from four to about fourteen men: commander (T–28 instructor pilot, major or lieutenant colonel, with background in counterinsurgency operations); paramedic (cross trained in personal equipment as a radio operator);[10] radio operator (qualified in radio maintenance); flight-line chief; intelligence officer; aircraft radio technician; ground equipment specialist; munitions specialist; weapons mechanic; two aircraft engine mechanics; and one or more Raven forward air controllers, as necessary.[11]

Manning for the enlarged air operations centers would be furnished by the Special Air Warfare Center at Hurlburt Field, Florida. During his first tour, Colonel Tyrrell had developed a deep respect for the initiative and good judgment of the air commandos and their ability to adjust to the unconventional environment of Laos. He felt that SAWC would do a better job of screening personnel than the Military Personnel Center, and that the commandos were better suited by training and temperament to "endure the frustrations of this unique work" than regular pipeline replacements.[12]

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7. Memo, AmEmb Vientiane, subj: Dinner at Ambassador's with Senior Army Officers, Jul 17, 1968, in ltr, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Corruption of the Lao Armed Forces, Jul 22, 1968.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 250120Z Jul 68, subj: Request for Special Air Warfare Specialists; Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, pp 14–55.
10. The medic assigned to Vientiane was a flight surgeon, but all others were enlisted men. The flight surgeon also served as air attaché medical officer. All medical personnel were expected to take part in military civic action programs among the Laotians as well as caring for the Americans.
11. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CINCPAC, 250120Z Jul 68.
12. *Ibid*; msg, 7th AF to PACAF, 130750Z Nov 70, subj: Status of US Personnel in Laos; Tyrrell intvw, May 12, 1975, p 128; intvw, Lt Col Vaughan H. Gallacher and Hugh N. Ahmann with Maj Jesse E. Scott, AOC Comdr, Vientiane, Apr 6, 1973, pp 47–49.

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[redacted]

The Final Phase Begins

[redacted] Headquarters USAF accepted Tyrrell's rationale and established Operation Palace Dog. Under this program SAWC, eager to enhance its declining role in Southeast Asia, provided the AOC commander, paramedic, radio operator, and flight-line chief on six months rotation. The intelligence officer continued to be assigned for one year, and the mechanics came for six months at a time from the Water Pump detachment at Udorn.[13]

[redacted] The bulk of the personnel picked under Palace Dog were Water Pump veterans. Even so, all received a three-week course covering conditions in Laos, their duties, and problems they were likely to encounter. Eventually, Palace Dog teams returning from Laos briefed those preparing to go over. Continuity was further enhanced by the number of commandos who came back for second and third tours, rotating between Hurlburt, Palace Dog, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force.

[redacted] As with other American military personnel in Laos (save the accredited attachés), the AOC personnel wore civilian clothes, carried embassy identification cards, and were addressed as "mister." The AOC commanders were forbidden to fly in combat. However, administrative and "proficiency" flights were permitted, and the air commandos were not above stretching a point to get the job done. Colonel Tyrrell knew what was going on but chose to ignore it so long as it was not officially brought to his attention. He felt that the commandos operated best with the least supervision.[14]

[redacted] With the first contingent of air commandos in place by November, the results began to show. At Pakse, for example, Maj. Jerome W. Klingaman, one of the Water Pump veterans, found that every T–28 pilot had a venereal disease. Operations were at a complete standstill and Colonel Tyrrell had just fired the previous AOC commander for incompetence. Circumstances were so bad that Tyrrell was considering closing the AOC. Major Klingaman turned things completely around in a few weeks. Learning that the men had not been given medical treatment because they had no money, he had his medic administer the necessary pills and shots. He improved their living and working conditions, gave on-the-job-training to ground personnel, and personally supervised proficiency training for the pilots. Under his leadership the squadron began flying again and, more important, putting their bombs on target. When Klingaman wound up his six-month tour, the Pakse Air Operations Center was generally judged the best in the country.[15]

[redacted] To refine coordination between Laotian air and ground forces, a joint operations center (JOC) was created in each military region. Here the regional commander and his staff could meet with air and ground commanders, the AOC commander (who additionally served as air liaison officer), an assistant air attaché, and representatives from the CIA and the requirements office of the embassy AID section. This "regional country team" would review and coordinate forthcoming operations. After the JOC meeting, the airmen would return to the air operations center (usually located at the airfield) to work out the precise details. Formerly, air support requests had gone from the military region commander to FAR headquarters in Vientiane, then to RLAF headquarters, and finally back down to the AOC. With the advent of the JOCs, coordination could be carried out at the regional level. Information copies of plans and proposed flight mission orders were sent to Vientiane, which could veto or alter the plans but was not otherwise engaged in day-to-day operations. This let the general staff focus on administration, organization, equipment, training, and policy.

[redacted] The one missing ingredient was an air request net. Neither the Royal Laotian Air Force nor the air attaché had sufficiently skilled people to man tactical air control parties in the various

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13. [redacted] Scott Intvw, Apr 6, 1973, p 50; Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, p 86.
14. [redacted] Msg, 7th AF to PACAF, 130750Z Nov 70; Tyrrell intvw, May 12, 1975, p 128; Scott intvw, Apr 6, 1973, pp 47–49.
15. [redacted] Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Lt Col Howard K. Hartley, COC advisor, Jul 14, 1974, pp 18–19.

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field units. In consequence, air support requests traveled from the ground commander back to the JOC and from there to the AOC. Once airborne, the fighters simply flew their assigned missions unless the ground commander happened to have a radio with frequencies matching those of the aircraft radios. (In the case of guerrilla units, USAF aircraft could talk to the [redacted] English-speaking forward air guides, or Raven forward air controllers whose backseater could talk to the local ground commander.)[16]

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(S) Rounding out the tactical air control system was a combined operations center in Vientiane. The COC was supposed to allocate resources and coordinate operations between the military regions and serve as a centralized point for scheduling and control of airlift operations. The nucleus of a COC had been functioning since 1966 but had lacked the personnel, communications, and (most of all) direction to be effective. To correct these shortcomings, Colonel Tyrrell asked the Special Air Warfare Center for an "airlift expert" to act as advisor to the combined operations center. Under the guise of improving management, his real purpose was to curtail smuggling by taking the C–47 scheduling away from the military region commanders and centralizing it in the COC under the watchful eye of an American "advisor."

(S) In response to Tyrrell's request, SAWC sent its director of operations, Lt. Col. Howard K. Hartley, to Vientiane. Together, Tyrrell and Hartley firmed up the details of the operation. The FAR general staff members were surprisingly receptive to the idea since it would give them a direct hand in the C–47 operations. The military region commanders were less enthusiastic but went along.

(S) At first, Hartley ran the operation virtually by himself, but gradually he worked the Laotians into the system. Smuggling fell off sharply, but not because the general staff was any more honest than the military region commanders. The decrease was achieved, as the advisor had hoped, by scheduling everything out in the open. There were too many fingers in the pot for anyone to get away with much. Still, as Hartley pointed out to the ambassador, "Any Military Region commander can simply dispatch one of his crews and not report it. If the pilot is brazen enough to question his activities he would be relieved or reassigned."[17] Although smuggling was not entirely stopped, it was pared to the point where it did not interfere with combat operations.

(S) The combined operations center was less successful at coordinating operations between the military regions. Each military commander remained a satrap, controlling his own resources and running his own war with scant regard for other military regions or directions from Vientiane. In November 1968, T–28s from both Savannakhet and Pakse had combined to halt the communist drive when the communist threatened Saravane, but such cooperation was the exception rather than the rule.[18]

(S) To complement the tactical air control system, Colonel Tyrrell proposed the introduction of a C–47 mobile training team to give the RLAF night and all-weather, maintenance, and transport capabilities and to develop a cadre of Laotians to continue the in-country program. At the same time, it would provide an American-oriented core of transport personnel more interested in prosecuting the war than in lining their pockets. Based on Water Pump's experience with the T–28 pilots, the program looked promising.[19]

(S) The original plan included six instructor pilots, six flight engineers, and six mechanics to be in place at Udorn by December 15 and a six-month training period to upgrade two Laotian pilots to instructors and four others to aircraft commanders. The plan also included training for twelve maintenance men, six as flight engineers and six others as crewchiefs. The air attaché was

16. (S) Background Paper, DCS/Plans, 7th AF, subj: USAF Operations in Laos, Jan 21, 1971.
17. (S) Hartley intvw, Jul 14, 1974, p 15.
18. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 041756Z Jun 69, subj: Dry Season Wrap-Up.
19. (S) Rprt, Comdr, C–47 MTT, to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, C–47 MTT Final Report, Aug 10, 1969.

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to have operational control through the Water Pump detachment, with actual flight training conducted at Nam Phong, Thailand, due to the combat airspace over Udorn. (Water Pump was already using Nam Phong, about sixty miles southeast of Udorn, for T–28 training. A detachment of F–111s also operated out of the base.)[20]

On August 1, 1968, Ambassador Sullivan asked the deputy chief of the military advisory group at Bangkok to obtain Thai approval for stationing the mobile training team at Udorn. The Royal Thai Air Force gave informal approval but suggested Phitsanulok in northwest Thailand as the site. The Thai wanted Phitsanulok developed to support their own counterinsurgency program, and they were aware of the American penchant for improving facilities at any base they occupied. Because Udorn was overdeveloped and construction at Nam Phong was under way, building up Phitsanulok (at American expense) would enhance Thai counterinsurgency objectives.[21]

Feeling this was a fair trade, the deputy chief sent the proposal to CINCPAC with the recommendation that the mobile training team be put under his operational control. Colonel Tyrrell and the ambassador accepted the choice of Phitsanulok but demurred on the question of control. Headquarters USAF endorsed the plan and instructed the Special Air Warfare Center to form the mobile training team. However, the date slipped to March 1969 and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force assigned operational control, but exercised through the Water Pump detachment. Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force then suggested the site be changed back to Udorn, a change the Thais approved on February 19, 1969. The approval came none too soon since the mobile training team was on its way, the first contingent arriving on February 24 and the remainder on March 2.[22]

The team comprised twenty-four people—five pilots and nineteen enlisted men. On March 8 the first class of eighteen students started eleven days of ground training. Flying training (transition and instrument flying) began on March 19 and ended on June 8. Midway through this phase, Colonel Tyrrell expanded the training to add assault operations, aerial resupply, psychological operations, and, with Laos scheduled for gunships, AC–47 familiarization. During the gunship training phase (June 9–July 31), two loadmasters and two gunners augmented the mobile training team, while the RLAF sent additional students. Gunship orientation took place on one of the four USAF AC–47s that had been operating out of Udorn since March.[23]

As training went on, it became apparent that follow-on teams were needed to make the Laotians self-sufficient. The second training team arrived on August 9, only two days before the first group headed home. It and subsequent mobile training teams were reduced to eight men (two instructor pilots, two loadmasters, two gunners, one engineer, and one crewchief) because two Laotian pilots, two engineers, and two crewchiefs from the first group of students stayed to help train their own people.[24]

Though the American role shrunk to that of supervision and evaluation, one team followed another until 1970. Like the original Water Pump program, which was also meant to be a one-time affair, the mobile training team became a semipermanent fixture in the USAF Military Assistance Program.

This being the case, the deputy chief of the military advisory group suggested on November 21 that the team be converted to permanent change of station and placed under his

20. (U) *Ibid.*
21. (U) DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI AF Div Hist Sum, Apr 1–Sep 30, 1968, in DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI Hist Sum (Jun 66–Apr 68), May 11, 1968, Annex A [hereafter cited as AF Div Hist Sum with appropriate dates].
22. (U) AF Div Hist Sum, Oct 1–Dec 31, 1968; see note 19; hist rpt, Dir/Comd Relations, DCS/Plans, PACAF, in hist, PACAF, Jul-Dec 68, Vol III.
23. (U) See note 19.
24. (U) See note 19.

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operational control.[25] Colonel Tyrrell objected on several points. Inasmuch as the idea was to make the Laotians self-sufficient, a permanent mobile training team would signal an abandonment of this principle.[26] Then, too, the air attaché preferred the air commandos to regular Air Force personnel. Finally, he, the ambassador, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force balked at the deputy chief's bid to carve out an operational role for himself in Laos.[27] CINCPAC supported the ambassador, killing the deputy chief's proposal. Afterwards, the ambassador and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, ostensibly on the grounds of limiting the American presence in the country, blocked Tyrrell's attempt to move the mobile training team into Laos under his own control.[28]

The results of the mobile training team were somewhat less than hoped for. The Laotian pilots proved capable enough, but the radio operators, flight engineers, and loadmasters never fully mastered the technical aspects of their jobs. Nonetheless, overall operations improved somewhat and the C–47s' tactical support began to be effective.

While Tyrrell worked to strengthen RLAF operations, he did not ignore administration and supply—both notably weak points with the Laotians. A December 1968 manpower survey contained the initial comprehensive listing of RLAF personnel and their duties. It further afforded Laotian airmen the first real look at their own unit, the skills needed, and the manpower available. The survey prompted administrative and organizational changes that enhanced personnel assignment and reduced payroll padding.[29]

In spite of several years of U.S. assistance, maintenance in the Royal Laotian Air Force was far from self-sufficient. The RLAF had plenty of trained mechanics, but supervision was weak and morale shaky due to low pay and poor facilities. One report said the Laotians could do less than half of the phase maintenance on their T–28s, and performed aircraft inspections more in theory than in fact. Another report depicted one Laotian aircraft as "a flying accident going someplace to happen."[30]

The supply system likewise operated with little sense of direction. Deficiencies included excessive stocks, funds spent on "goodie" items, random distribution, rampant theft and pilferage, and nonexistent accounting. To tighten supervision, Tyrrell called on Col. Ralph Newman, retired USAF and head of the requirements office of the embassy AID section. In October 1968, Newman directed weapons systems liaison officers to monitor the principal supply accounts at the main RLAF depot at Savannakhet. This improved operations some, but this depot had grown too large for the Laotians to manage. In February 1969, the embassy shaved Laotian responsibility to minor maintenance such as changing tires and replacing spark plugs. Major inspections and maintenance of the C–47s was done under contract with Thai-Am, a joint Thai-U.S. company operating out of Bangkok. Air America and Water Pump did major maintenance on the rest of the Laotian air fleet. The depot at Savannakhet was accordingly diminished in size and moved to Vientiane where the requirements office could furnish supervision. At the same time, forward supply points were set up at the main bases to stock a few high-consumption items.[31]

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25. Msg, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 9490, 210221Z Nov 69.
26. Actually, the principle had long since been abandoned in the case of the T–28, due to the high attrition rate and constant demands of combat that precluded the release of experienced pilots to serve as instructors.
27. Msg, Amb Sullivan to Gen McConnell, subj: C–47 Mobile Assistance Team, n.d. [ca Nov 69].
28. Hist, CINCPAC, 1969, II, 24.
29. Ltr, George W. Nathan to Ralph Newman, subj: RLAF Organization, Training and Manpower Assignments, Dec 15, 1969.
30. AF Div Hist Sum, Jun 66–Apr 68, p iv; Seith EOTR, Mar 27, 1969, p 3.
31. AF Div Hist Sum, Oct 1, 1968–Jun 30, 1969; intvw, Lt Col Richard R. Sexton with Col Ralph Newman, USAF, Ret, Jun 21, 1978; Scott intvw, Apr 6, 1973, pp 18–19.

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In addition, the embassy came up with a new pay scale for the RLAF. Pay for a common airmen went from $4 to $5 a month while a staff sergeant with over twenty years service got $10.50. Officer pay ranged from $13.15 a month for a second lieutenant to $24.78 for a major with over six years service. Besides, married personnel received an allowance of $1 per child each month and crewmembers were paid a bonus of $2 for every mission flown. However, 6 percent of this pay was withheld to finance a retirement plan and forty cents a mission was taken out to provide a bonus for ground crews.

To augment this meager pay, the Laotians were allowed to sell brass shell casings, the brass shipping rings and scrap lumber from bomb cases, and their used cluster bomb unit dispensers. Pilots received 60 percent of the profits, the ground crews 25 percent, and the air operations center commander received 15 percent for the general welfare of Laotian personnel. By regulating the sale of these items, the AOC commanders cut down on some of the pilferage and ensured a more equitable distribution of the proceeds.[32] As a sidelight, the system encouraged the Laotians to fly as many missions as possible.

The upshot of these combined actions was dramatic. Smuggling and pilferage declined, morale rose, and the RLAF once more became an efficient military force. From a low of 235 T–28 sorties in August 1968, the rate climbed to 750 in September, to nearly 1,000 in October, and ended the year with just under 1,400. Sorties rates for the C–47, helicopters, and O–1s showed a similar upturn.

While Tyrrell and company rebuilt the RLAF, Seventh Air Force weighed its own future operations. The bombing halt above the 19th parallel had deprived the Air Force of most industrial and fixed military targets in North Vietnam and allowed the enemy to step up the flow of men and materiél southward. To disrupt this flow, Seventh Air Force launched a new interdiction program called Operation Turnpike. Between April 19 and October 31, 1968, tactical fighters and B–52s (using laser guided bombs for the first time) waged an around-the-clock campaign against all known truck parks and storage areas along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and in Route Package I in southern North Vietnam. Meantime, Seventh Air Force planned an even more ambitious assault on the trail. Designated Commando Hunt and due to begin on November 1, this operation drew on the lessons learned during Turnpike and capitalized on the latest developments in technology, especially the use of sensors and gunships.[33]

As this planning progressed, General Brown, Seventh Air Force commander, felt that the rules of engagement needed changing and sent proposed changes to Ambassador Sullivan on July 6.[34] The ambassador pointed out "we currently hold no persuasive evidence to indicate that present rules of engagement are inadequate to cope with enemy infiltration into South Vietnam." Nonetheless, he welcomed a meeting with General Brown to review the overall air situation in Laos, especially in view of the prospects for a complete bombing halt over North Vietnam, and suggested Udorn as the meeting site.[35] Actually, Sullivan was less concerned with the rules of engagement in the south than with the prospects of the forthcoming campaign scaling down operations in northern Laos. Thus, he wanted an overall perusal of air operations and was set to use his approval of changes to the rules of engagement in the south as a club to ensure continued support in the north.

For his part, General Brown was no more interested in northern Laos than General Momyer had been. However, being more politic than his predecessor, he read between the lines of the ambassador's reply and agreed to the expanded scope of the meeting.

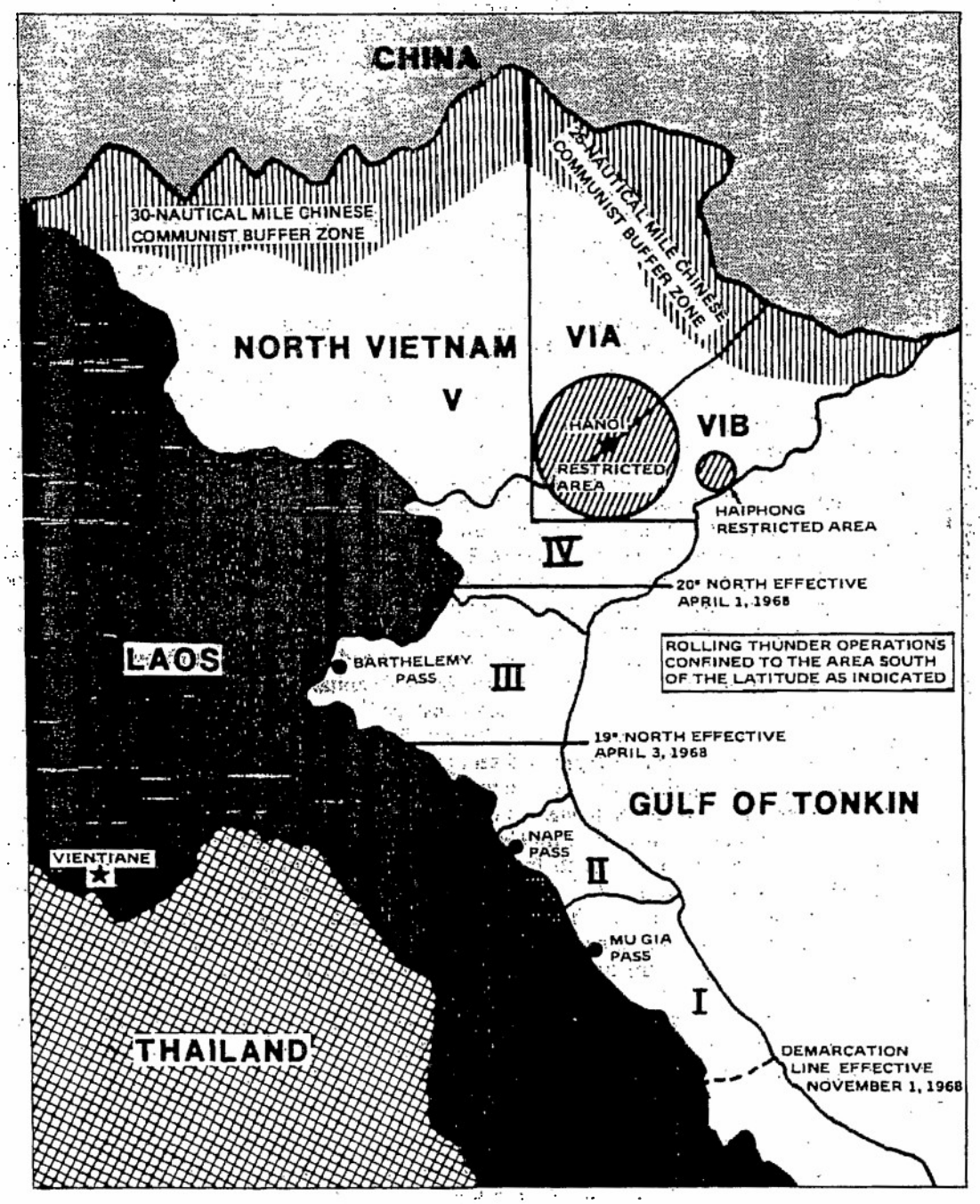
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32. [redacted] Ltr, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Source of Income for RLAF Personnel, Jul 24, 1971.
33. [redacted] Hist, CINCPAC, 1968, III, 291–92; *Air Traffic Con Ops*, pp 47–51.
34. [redacted] Msg, MACV to AmEmb Vientiane, 060756Z Jul 68, subj: Rules of Engagement.
35. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to MACV, 7695, 091005Z Jul 68.

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Restricted Areas over North Vietnam



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[redacted] Held on September 9, the conference made a comprehensive review of the war in Laos and produced the most significant change in the pattern of air operations since April 1966. Besides Ambassadors Unger and Sullivan, the conferees included General Brown; Brig. Gen. George J. Keegan, Jr., Deputy Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Seventh Air Force; Brig. Gen. Robert J. Holbury, Director of Combat Operations, Seventh Air Force; Maj. Gen. Louis T. Seith, Deputy Commander, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force; Brig. Gen. John W. Baer, Deputy Commander MACTHAI; and Colonel Tyrrell and his assistant, Colonel Sonnenberg. Adm. John S. McCain, Jr., CINCPAC, was represented by his deputy chief of staff for plans and operations, Maj. Gen. Chesley G. Peterson. Also in attendance were the CIA station chief in Laos and his deputy, and the political-military advisors from Vientiane and Bangkok.

[redacted] The conference focused on the forthcoming Commando Hunt campaign, and discussion did not turn to northern Laos until mid-afternoon. At this point, Ambassador Sullivan made it clear that his and Souvanna's approval of expanded air operations in southern Laos would be contingent upon greater air support of northern operations.

> [redacted] Souvanna has agreed with me that in the event a complete halt of the bombing of North Vietnam is ordered, the USAF can spend any amount of sorties it wants to in Laos, providing it is within the ROE [rules of engagement].
>
> [redacted] I don't think he quite realizes yet just how much pressure will be on him when this happens. The press and the Soviets are going to become aware and any cover stories that we have for Laos are going to be pretty thin. But he assures me he is going to stand firm under this pressure and continue the operation as long as he gets something in the north. It's so they don't feel that they are giving us carte blanche in the south without getting any return which is more central to their interests.[36]

[redacted] Sullivan then brought up the issue of sortie allocation. "Over the past year," he said, "we've been up and down with Spike [General Momyer] on how many sorties we get per day. It's not so much a question of the daily sortie rate, it's a question of having assurance that we will have the sorties when we need them, where we need them."[37] To underscore this point, the ambassador recalled a recent incident:

> [redacted] For example, the Muong Peun operation depends on a Lt Ba Kri. Now Ba Kri is not the most aggressive of people but this time he and his men are in a hell of a good mood and he has decided that his troops can take Muong Peun. So we kick off the operation. It's not that Ba Kri has refused to go in the past. He merely regrets that his troops are sick, he doesn't have enough supplies, etc, etc.
>
> [redacted] This, of course, complicates our air support. When Vang Pao decides that today is the day for beginning the movement against Muong Peun, we can't wait to come up with air support. If we don't have the air [support] then either the operation can't go or we suffer heavier losses.[38]

[redacted] In reply, General Brown assured Ambassador Sullivan that he was "not the man to lose Laos." His instructions from Washington, however, were to "minimize U.S. casualties" and this could best be done by massing American air power against the flow of enemy men and supplies into South Vietnam. "Nevertheless," he said, pounding the table for emphasis, "if we make a commitment to northern Laos, we'll meet it." He then played a few cards of his own. In the past, he noted:

> There has not been any intimate coordinated work in preparation and planning. In other words, you all cook up a scheme and get these guys all aroused and then come to us at

36. [redacted] Transcript, Udorn Conference, Sep 9, 1968, p 54.
37. [redacted] *Ibid.*
38. [redacted] *Ibid*, p 55.

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> the last minute and ask for air support and we don't have time to properly evaluate the request.[39]

Henceforth any "commitment" would be based on joint planning and evaluation:

> In the future, I would hope that when we get a request from you, I would have some control over it. I would want to be assured if we got a requirement for "X" sorties on these dates, for this operation, that this was really, in our combined judgment, what is needed. As it is, we sort of take things on good faith, you know. Unless we get photography and scrub it down [i.e. analyze it] and see that, yes, there is a requirement for so many sorties, we can't act on it.[40]

Subsequent discussion made it clear that the coordination Brown had in mind was not "a guy who tags along and attends staff meetings and that sort of thing," but real joint planning. The proper agency for this, Brown said, was Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. Its commander, General Seith, said he was ready to undertake the task. Surprisingly Ambassador Sullivan, who had steadfastly rejected similar proposals in the past, agreed. "Fine," he said, "that is exactly what we want." however, remained silent and Colonel Tyrrell, who saw himself as "odd man out" made some minor remonstrance but appeared assuaged when he was assured that he would be kept "in the loop."[41] The discussion next returned to various logistic and administrative problems associated with Commando Hunt.

(b)(1) STATE

In terms of concrete decisions concerning northern Laos, the conference did not achieve much. There was even some disagreement over what had been decided. In his summary message to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Sullivan said General Brown had consented to "relax command control arrangements in Barrel Roll," allowing him to "execute operations requiring USAF support."[42] Brown's report to General McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, was silent on relaxing control or delegating authority. Instead, he claimed that command control would be strengthened since the ambassador had "agreed" to give the Air Force a voice in planning future operations.[43] This difference of interpretation would hamper cooperation between the embassy and the Air Force for quite a while.

Nor were the respective roles of Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force or Colonel Tyrrell's office clarified. This was left to be worked out as operations progressed. As it turned out, neither developed into anything more than a cipher for Seventh Air Force and the CIA, respectively. The conference nonetheless served to clear the air and bring into the open problems that had been festering for years. It also spelled out the views of the participants and set in motion a series of actions that paved the way for an effective, though short-lived, partnership between General Vang Pao and the Air Force over the next year.

One immediate outcome of the conference was the establishment of a photo-interpretation section within Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force that allowed Colonel Tyrrell and General Seith to independently assess CIA and USAF photography. In addition, the targeting procedure changed, with a Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force list replacing the old RLAF target list. Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force prepared its list from intelligence reports, photo reconnaissance, airborne radio direction finding, and visual recce by Raven and jet forward air controllers. Especially lucrative or perishable targets were sent out to the Ravens at six each morning for possible strikes during the day. Since the air attaché still had to validate all fixed targets, Tyrrell stationed one of his men at Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force to speed up

39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid*, pp 56–57.
42. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 100620Z Sep 68.
43. Msg, 7th AF (Gen Brown) to CSAF (Gen McConnell), 120918Z Sep 68.

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this procedure. Nonperishable targets, accompanied by appropriate photography, were dispatched to Vientiane once a week and, when validated, were filed in a "data bank" at Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. By August 1969, this list included approximately 550 targets, but nearly 500 of these targets were "lifted" from the old RLAF list, with only about 50 being truly "new" targets. Each day, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force selected about 30 targets and sent them to Saigon. Targeteers at Seventh Air Force picked about 15 of these as primary targets to be hit two days later and passed the others to the ABCCC and to FACs as alternate targets. The whole process consumed anywhere from three to ten days, even more if ambassadorial approval was required. Thus, the chief emphasis was on perishable targets that could be struck within six to twelve hours.[44]

The new targeting procedure surpassed but shared one weakness with the RLAF list. That is, priorities were not established nor targets grouped into "target systems" associated with a specific operation that could be destroyed in a coherent manner. Instead, the targets were struck on a piecemeal, random basis. Hence, individual targets often yielded impressive results, but the whole never equaled the sum of the parts, nor did it have any measurable effect on enemy operations. Small wonder, then, that targeteers in Saigon gave little credence to and placed a low priority on targets in northern Laos. It continued to be regarded as a "dumping ground" for sorties that could not find targets elsewhere.

Formation of photo-interpretation and targeting sections within Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force likewise led to differences with the CIA, which continued its own targeting, with frequent (occasionally acrimonious) disputes over who had the best photo interpreters or did the best job of targeting. At higher levels, these disagreements tended to reflect institutional considerations; but at the working level, the clashes were more of a technical nature arising from different training and special interests. The CIA stressed ground targets, while the Air Force sought targets that could be hit from the air.[45]

To resolve some of these problems and to upgrade coordination between the Air Force and CIA, the Udorn Targeting Group expanded into the Barrel Roll Working Group. Besides Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, the air attaché, the CIA, and Seventh Air Force, the group included representatives from the ABCCC and various tactical units participating in northern Laos. While the working group had no planning or decisionmaking function, its participants met twice a month to review the entire spectrum of current and planned operations, to exchange information informally, and to gain a deeper insight into one another's capabilities and limitations. This in itself was a major improvement over the void of the past.[46]

Meanwhile, developments in Laos concerned planners in Washington. On October 17, 1968, Mr. Walt W. Rostow, national security adviser to President Johnson, asked Mr. Paul C. Warnke, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, for an appraisal of the situation in Laos and possible responses. Warnke in turn asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff for recommendations in the event the North Vietnamese (1) remain in Laos but not engage in any overt act against the Laotian government, remaining merely a threat to Laos and for possible reentry into South Vietnam; (2) afford enough additional support to the Pathet Lao "to create a threat of overrunning Laos, gradually, measuring our response as they go"; or (3) supply sufficient support to the Pathet Lao to actually overrun the country.[47]

The Joint Chiefs pointed out that the third postulate already existed—the North Vietnamese had the forces in Laos to overrun the country at their pleasure. That they had not

44. ( ) Seith EOTR, Mar 27, 1969, pp 23–24.
45. ( ) *Ibid*; Scott intvw, Apr 6, 1973, p 43.
46. ( ) Seith EOTR, Mar 27, 1969, p 46.
47. ( ) Memo, ASD/ISA to JCS, subj: Contingency Planning for Enemy Action in Laos, Oct 17, 1968.

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done so was ascribed to political restraint, not the lack of capability. As to U.S. responses, the JCS felt as long as the enemy showed restraint there should be no overt American intervention, save for "close air support of RLG forces by U.S. air elements consistent with the priority of other requirements." If the North Vietnamese renewed their offensive, it would reveal their participation in the Paris peace talks as fraudulent and their expansionist policies changed only in direction. In this case, stepped-up air operations would slow the communist advance but would not be decisive by themselves and might wind up competing for resources needed elsewhere. On the other hand, a major commitment of ground forces could hold the Mekong Valley but would create another large logistic problem. Moreover, it would "enmesh major U.S. forces in a situation which would be prolonged and from which they could not be readily extricated." The Joint Chiefs also reminded Mr. Warnke that without a request from Souvanna, there would be no legal basis for introducing American ground forces.

In short, the chiefs concluded that the communists could not be prevented from overrunning Laos without a major campaign against their forces in Laos, "a campaign which would be costly and uncertain of success unless accompanied by the defeat of North Vietnam." To do this would demand air and naval operations against North Vietnam "without militarily confining restraints." The JCS believed these measures would unmistakably show our resolve and, if prosecuted vigorously, would "destroy the capability and will of North Vietnam to persist in aggression." However, such actions would contravene expressed U.S. policy, would endanger third-country shipping, risk adverse domestic and world reaction, and might invite Chinese intervention.

In conclusion, the military chiefs recommended continued air support at roughly the current level. They realized such limited support was no substitute for effective ground forces and would not lead to a military defeat of the communists. Yet it would supplement friendly ground troops, bolstering their firepower and mobility to offset in part the lopsided balance of numbers enjoyed by the enemy. This would make further communist encroachments costly and might even assist the Laotian government to regain some of its territory. Still, in the final analysis, the fate of Laos lay in the hands of the North Vietnamese and in the actions taking place in South Vietnam.[48]

The decisions in Udorn and Washington set the general direction of the American response, but events inside Laos shaped the specific details. Despite Sullivan's stricture against any wet-season offensive, General Vang Pao was bent on retaking Lima Site 85—his reputation and standing among the Meo depended on it. When the ambassador threatened to withhold the needed helicopter support, the fiery Meo general replied, "Very well, we will walk!" In the end he got his helicopters, and on June 27 moved 750 guerrillas to Lima Site 184, about thirty miles southwest of Site 85. From there, he planned to strike overland to seize the airfield at Muong Son some fifteen miles closer to his final objective. With Muong Son secure, more men would be brought in for the main assault.[49]

As usual, there was no advance coordination with the Air Force and no air support plan other than a request for 20 extra sorties a day.[50] Seventh Air Force turned down this request but diverted fifteen aircraft from the normal Barrel Roll schedule to support the operation. Though the initial landing was unopposed, the attack soon bogged down due to weather and unexpected enemy resistance. Unlike previous years, the communists were obviously prepared to hold onto and fight for their newly won territory. To break this impasse, the Air Force launched 292 sorties between July 5 and 20 against enemy positions blocking Vang Pao's advance. The foe gradually

48. JCSM-650-68 to SECDEF, Contingency Planning for Enemy Action in Laos, Oct 30, 1968.
49. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 220742Z Oct 68, subj: Muong Son Operation.
50. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 260130Z Jun 68; subj: Air Support Request.

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gave ground. On July 22, the Meo finally reached Muong Son, but the offensive was already three weeks behind schedule. During the next three weeks, the communists, now fully alerted and aware of Vang Pao's objective, mounted a series of counterattacks on Muong Son that were beaten off with the help of air strikes. However, enemy gunners prevented the airfield from being used to bring in reinforcements and supplies or to evacuate the wounded.[51]

With the ground battle deadlocked, there were few worthwhile targets in the Muong Son area. The Air Force went back to disrupting the North Vietnamese logistic system but cut Barrel Roll sorties from 32 a day in August to 26 in September and 22 in October. The CIA objected to both these actions. Noting that success to date had been "largely due to excellent support rendered by USAF tactical airstrikes," the CIA felt "anything less than our austere request for 35 sorties daily would significantly handicap Vang Pao."[52] At the September 9 conference at Udorn, the CIA station chief went even further. Up to 120 sorties a day could be absorbed, he said, but if 65 were not forthcoming "the entire wet season offensive will be in jeopardy."[53]

Actually, the offensive had shot its bolt. While the Meo sat at Muong Son wasting away from disease and enemy harassment, the North Vietnamese began building up their own forces in anticipation of the approaching dry season. Intelligence sources disclosed that as many as sixteen North Vietnamese battalions were massing in the Samneua area while three more held Site 85 itself. According to Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force this was "the largest concentration of men, equipment, and material on the Indochina Peninsula."[54] Seeing his position as untenable, General Vang Pao conceived a bold plan to strike directly at Phou Phathi. Even though it was late in the season, he felt he could pull it off and was prepared to commit fifteen hundred men to the venture. The embassy was not so sure. Not only did Sullivan doubt that a direct attack would succeed, but he saw no point in seizing a mountain that had lost its strategic significance (for the Americans at least). He did think that a sudden assault might catch the enemy off-balance and upset his timetable for the dry-season offensive. So he was prepared to support the plan.[55]

Sullivan discussed the idea on November 4, 1968, with General McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, who was visiting Udorn at the time. The ambassador reported that "arrangements for increasing air support from thirty to one hundred sorties per day" were worked out. Controlled American Source, the air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force would handle the details.[56] Unfortunately, we do not have General McConnell's account of this meeting; Seventh Air Force records do not shed any light; and, as seen earlier, Sullivan's interpretation of what was agreed to sometimes differed from that of the Air Force.

Long-standing differences could not be resolved overnight, and this first attempt to implement the Udorn decisions was not completely successful. Nevertheless, valuable experience was gained and a joint air support plan was drawn up. Initially, the Central Intelligence Agency was reluctant to share its plans with the Air Force. This stemmed in part from the vagueness of Vang Pao's own plans. He was basically an opportunist who fixed on broad objectives, taking advantage of tactical situations that developed. Then, too, there were differences in strategic and operational precepts. Vang Pao's chief interest was in retaking Lima Site 85 to restore his prestige. The Americans were principally concerned with disrupting the impending communist offensive, with General Seith stating

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51. Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, subj: Muong Son Sitrep Summary, Jul 22, 1968; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, XLIX, 2–4.
52. Memo, 4802d JLD to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Barrel Roll AC–130 Operations, Sep 2, 1968.
53. Transcript, Udorn Conference, Sep 9, 1968, p 52.
54. Msg, 7th AF/13th AF, 271120Z Nov 68, subj: Barrel Roll Frag, Dec 1–4, 1968.
55. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 040950Z Nov 68.
56. *Ibid.*

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The War in Northern Laos

> There appears to be genuine agreement (between 7AF/13AF officials, CAS representatives, and 7AF officials) that stopping the enemy dry season offensive in northern Laos is a worthwhile and desirable objective. Achieving this will directly support overall U.S. objectives in Laos.[57]

The CIA presumed this could best be achieved by having a more or less continuous stream of aircraft over the battlefield, much as the Marines did for their forces, destroying enemy units as they sought to engage Vang Pao. The Air Force, however, held that the major thrust should be against Samneua before the communists had a chance to deploy.

> An effective strike in strength on the Sam Neua military complex would destroy or render ineffective the 16 battalions inside the area and a large number of weapons, vehicles, equipment, and supplies. It would also disorganize the command structure and reduce the number of supplies and replacements available to units operating in Sam Neua and northern Xieng Khouang Province, thus reducing the enemy's capability to launch a sustained consolidated offensive during this dry season.[58]

In essence, the Air Force preferred to attack fixed targets, which it could hit, rather than individuals hiding in the jungle, which it could not.

Disagreement likewise existed over numbers, ordnance, and timing. The CIA, air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force wanted a hundred sorties a day in addition to the normal Barrel Roll allocation. Seventh Air Force, already engaged in Commando Hunt (officially begun on November 15), felt that fifty sorties drawn mostly from the regular Barrel Roll schedule would suffice. Vang Pao and the Central Intelligence Agency also wanted napalm and cluster bomb units for use against troops in contact and one thousand-pound laser-guided bombs for use against caves, bunkers, and gun positions. The Air Force representatives said such weapons were desirable but in short supply. Instead, Seventh Air Force suggested five-hundred-pound general purpose bombs, which were plentiful and, in any case, would be more destructive against targets in the Samneua area. Lastly, the CIA wanted the air campaign to coincide with the ground offensive (Operation Pig Fat), but the Air Force contended that the air strikes, especially those against Samneua, should precede any ground movement to achieve maximum surprise.

> If successful, tactical air will prevent the enemy from resupplying and reinforcing effectively in reaction to Operation Pig Fat. It will also seriously limit the enemy's capability to launch sustained coordinated dry season offensive.[59]

The compromise reached had the Air Force furnishing eighty sorties a day for four days beginning December 1. Fifty aircraft carrying general purpose bombs would strike targets in the Samneua area, while thirty, armed with a mixed load of general purpose bombs, napalm, and cluster bomb units would directly support General Vang Pao. This special strike package would be over and above the regular Barrel Roll sorties. Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force further requested AC–130s and A–26s for night support, but received none because they were fully committed to Commando Hunt.[60]

As so frequently happened in Laos, nothing worked out quite the way it was planned. An unseasonable outbreak of rain delayed the strike package until December 7; and Vang Pao

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57. Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 291045Z Nov 68, subj: Recommended Barrel Roll Frag, Dec 1–4, 1968.
58. Msg, 7th AF/13th to 7 AF, 260932Z Nov 68, subj: Barrel Roll Frag, Dec 1–4, 1968.
59. Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 271416Z Nov 68, subj: Additional Justification for Recommended Barrel Roll Frag, Dec 1–4, 1968.
60. Memos, 7th AF to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Recommended Barrel Roll Frag, Dec 3, 1968, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, subj: Nimrod Support in Barrel Roll, Dec 3, 1968; msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 300240Z Nov 68, subj: AC–130 Gunship Support in Barrel Roll.

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moved three days early, the Meo kicking off a four-pronged attack on November 28. Seventh Air Force diverted scheduled Barrel Roll missions to support the advance. As with the Muong Son offensive, the North Vietnamese were caught flatfooted. One after another, the lima sites around Phou Phathi fell to the Meo. By December 6, they had reached Lima Site 107 on the main approach to Site 85 and emplaced a 105-mm howitzer there to pound the mountain. The weather cleared sufficiently the next day for the air package to go in, but the North Vietnamese had recovered from their surprise. They had dispatched the 148th Regiment (three battalions) to reinforce Phou Phathi and had dispersed or placed other units on full alert. Consequently, the strikes on Samneua did less damage than had been hoped for. Enemy antiaircraft fire downed one of the attacking F–105s, and the pilot was not recovered.[61]

Air strikes on Phou Phathi itself fared better. Meo, Laotian, and Thai pilots joined the Air Force in plastering the mountain with rockets, bombs, napalm, and cluster bomb units. Under this umbrella the Meo made steady progress, but the enemy contested every foot of ground. One prisoner said the communist leaders in Samneua instructed their force to cling to Phou Phathi, but warned nearby villagers that if the air strikes continued the site had to be abandoned.

On December 8, an A–1 was shot down while another A–1 and two helicopters were lost in the rescue effort. Only one pilot was rescued. Two days later, another A–1 was lost and the pilot was not recovered. Still the friendly advance pressed on. On December 18, the Meo managed to reach the helipad and abandoned radar sites on the summit. Elsewhere, however, the enemy clung tenaciously to the mountain and the Meo assault slowly lost momentum. Three days later, an enemy attack on Lima Site 107 destroyed the howitzer and killed the Meo commander, one of Vang Pao's nephews. A series of counterattacks on Christmas Day showed that Vang Pao had lost the initiative. More air strikes were called for on January 1–2, 1969, in preparation for a renewed assault the following day. Before the assault got under way, the North Vietnamese 148th Regiment overran Lima Site 107 on January 3, breaking the back of the Meo attack. As enemy pressure built, Vang Pao began to pull his men back from the mountain. On January 7, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force signaled "enemy now appears on offensive in entire area." Pig Fat had ended.[62]

Although failing to retake Site 85, Pig Fat delayed the North Vietnamese Army offensive at relatively small cost. Besides the aircrews, the Meo suffered 40 killed and 131 wounded; but enemy losses, due chiefly to air strikes, were much higher. One prisoner said over half of his battalion had been killed by air strikes, and less than 400 men had survived from the three battalions defending Site 85. The 148th Regiment was also hit hard, losing an estimated 128 killed and 250 wounded.[63] Perhaps the most striking aspect of the operation was that the allies were finally beginning to work as a single unit.

As the communists mopped up the lima sites around Phou Phathi, Vang Pao fell back on Lima Site 36 to await the main enemy thrust. The first blow, however, came far to the south in Military Region IV.

On December 13, 1968, three North Vietnamese battalions slammed into the town of Thateng on the northern edge of the Bolovens Plateau. The 250 defenders promptly retreated to a small fort on the fringe of the town, where they were surrounded by the enemy. Air strikes by Laotian and USAF fighters saved the fort that night, but there seemed no way it could

61. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LIII, 2–8 thru 2–9; Daily SITREPS, 7th AF/13th AF, Nov 28, 1968–Jan 8, 1969.

62. Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 071430Z Jan 69, subj: Operation Pig Fat.

63. Memo, 4802d JLD to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Operation Pig Fat, Dec 30, 1968; rprt, "Result of Airstrikes on or Near 148th NVA Regiment," Interrogation of NVA Officer, Rallied (May 1, 1969), May 8, 1969.

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withstand a prolonged siege. Yet that is just what took place—the defense of a fixed installation carried out almost completely from the air.

During the following week, the communists tried repeatedly to seize the fort. First, they used mortar fire to blast a path through the minefields and barbed wire surrounding the fort. Then came massed infantry attacks. Laotian T–28s, USAF fighters, and gunships strafed and bombed while the defenders sat huddled inside the fort, taking no active part in their own defense. The air strikes killed an estimated five hundred attackers and virtually leveled Thateng.

For the next month, the foe refrained from further frontal assaults but kept up intermittent mortar fire that closed the airfield and generally demoralized the defenders. Airdrops, however, kept the garrison adequately supplied. On the night of February 1/2, 1969, the North Vietnamese retumed to the attack. Human wave assaults after a mortar barrage demolished most of the perimeter defenses and came very close to reaching the fort itself. The timely arrival of USAF fighters and RLAF flareships again drove the communists back, killing several hundred before daylight ended the fighting.[64]

Since the defenders were clearly in jeopardy, the CIA and USAF planners readied a comprehensive air support plan. First priority went to replacing the perimeter minefields and barbed wire. Because the Laotians were loathe to venture outside the fort, the job had to be done from the air. Air America C–123s delivered the barbed wire. A crewman cut the binding as the bundles left the aircraft, and the coils expanded in the slipstream. Though unevenly distributed, the jumble of wire proved a serious obstacle to infantry attacks. The Air Force followed up by seeding wide area antipersonnel mines directly into the wire to further discourage the enemy. As fast as the communists removed the wire and exploded the mines, fresh sorties replaced them. To improve night communication between aircraft and the ground, Nail forward air controllers from Nakhon Phanom carrying Laotian observers supplemented the Ravens (Raven aircraft were not equipped for night flying), and Laotian observers were placed aboard the USAF gunships. The FACs and strike aircraft made a concerted effort to destroy the enemy mortar positions. The FACs very quickly became adept at spotting muzzle flashes from the mortars and directing air strikes on them. So successful was this tactic that the communist gunners grew reluctant to expose themselves. The Air Force also kept an almost continuous cover of gunships over the fort.[65]

This effort totally stymied the North Vietnamese. By the end of the month, the garrison's morale had lifted while that of the communists sagged. Agents infiltrating behind the enemy reported that some units had been virtually wiped out, while others were unwilling to expose themselves to the mines, barbed wire, and air strikes. Hence, seeding of wide area antipersonnel mines was stopped on March 6 to permit friendly patrols to move out of the fort. A few days later, reinforcements whisked in by RLAF and Air America helicopters set up a fire support base on a nearby hill to push the enemy farther away. This in turn let the Laotians reopen the airstrip for flying in fresh supplies and evacuating the wounded. After the North Vietnamese's final half-hearted stab on March 9, the siege of all intents and purposes was broken.[66]

The battle for Thateng had an ironic denouement. On April 4 the FAR inexplicably abandoned the fort. The communists were still in the area and resupply was difficult, but there was no immediate threat. The defenders simply walked out. Nonetheless, Thateng's successful defense convinced American planners that a well-planned air campaign could prevent the capture of any position in Laos. The key ingredients were antipersonnel mines, gunships, air-ground communication, mortar suppression, and availability of tactical fighters.[67]

64. [redacted] Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 191715Z Mar 69, subj: Tha Theng Summary.
65. [redacted] *Ibid*; memo, DS/Ops, 7th AF/13th AF, to Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Tha Theng Situation, Feb 6, 1969.
66. [redacted] Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 191715Z Mar 69.
67. [redacted] Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 010750Z Mar 69, subj: Site 36 Sitrep,

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The Final Phase Begins

In northern Laos, Pig Fat had delayed the communist offensive, but once under way the offensive accelerated rapidly in spite of constant harassment from air strikes. Thirty-four sites had fallen by the end of February (fifteen others remained in friendly hands), and the North Vietnamese were poised before Na Khang (Lima Site 36). This site had withstood major attacks in 1967 and 1968, and Vang Pao was confident it could be held again. Even though the permanent garrison comprised but three hundred men, he believed the North Vietnamese would have to mass seven or eight battalions for an attack. Since such a large concentration could not go undetected, he thought he would have adequate time to move in reinforcements. The North Vietnamese, however, had learned their lesson about massing troops in the face of air power. Later reports revealed that no more than two or three communist battalions engaged in the attack, and these were well dispersed in concealed positions around the site.[68]

In the afternoon of February 28, 1969, the communists launched their assault. They caught the normally alert Meo by surprise, overrunning the outposts. Seventh Air Force responded to an immediate call for air support by diverting other Barrel Roll strikes to assist the site, with two F–4 flights and a Raven FAC the first to arrive. Later, two F–105 flights replaced the F–4s, and the FAC directed these flights into suspected enemy positions around the site. An accurate assessment of strike results were impossible, but enemy fire slacked off and the situation seemed to stabilize. Flareships stayed overhead during the night but no attack occurred. The next day, Seventh Air Force ordered all aircraft scheduled for Barrel Roll to be diverted to Site 36. The first of these (four F–4s) arrived shortly before nine in the morning, but they could not expend their ordnance because the Raven FAC had not yet come. Instead, they flew several low passes over the area to show their presence.

Shortly after their departure, the FAC arrived along with a pair of A–1s. One was shot down, killing the pilot, but the other silenced two enemy machineguns. By midmorning, the main strike force assembled, and the FACs soon found they could not handle all the fighters on hand. Five flights were therefore diverted back to their original missions. The remaining aircraft struck all around the site but did little damage to the well-dispersed enemy—in fact, a defector later reported that during the entire battle the attackers lost only twenty-six men.[69]

Regardless of the enemy's success in avoiding air strikes, General Vang Pao judged that the defense was proceeding "routinely" and was prepared to dispatch 350 reinforcements the following day. Meanwhile, CIA, air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force officials were putting together an air support package based on the Thateng model. The plan called for a ten to fourteen-day operation consisting of aerial-delivered mines, gunships, forward air controllers, and tactical fighters. Seventh Air Force approved the plan, set to begin the next day. Unfortunately, on the night of March 1/2, a chance mortar round hit the Meo's command post, killing all of the officers. Deprived of effective leadership, the rest of the defenders slipped out of the camp under cover of darkness and made their way through the enemy lines. When the aircraft arrived the next morning, instead of defending the site, they destroyed the supplies left behind.[70]

The collapse of Lima Site 36 stunned the allies. With almost two months left in the dry season, the road to the Plain of Jars and Long Tieng beyond was wide open. To the west of Site 36, just the lightly held crescent formed by Lima Sites 50, 6, and 32 blocked the way to Muong Soui, behind the defense line of Long Tieng. The communists appeared to have ample time and

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68. Rprt, 4802d JLD to 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Site 36, May 1, 1969.
69. *Ibid*; msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 011125Z Mar 69, subj: Site 36 Sitrep; Weekly Laotian Report for the Period Feb 26–Mar 4, 1969, 7th AF/13th AF, Mar 6, 1969; Cricket ABCCC Mission Report, Mar 1, 1969.
70. Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 011125Z Mar 69; Weekly Laotian Report for the Period Feb 26–Mar 4, 1969, 7th AF/13th AF, Mar 6, 1969.

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resources to advance along either axis, with little that the allies could interpose in their way. On March 18 a disheartened Ambassador Sullivan noted in his farewell message:

> As I leave Laos, I wish I could say that I am leaving it in much better condition than I found it in 1964. Unfortunately, that is far from true. There have been some improvements in political stability, in the spread of economic benefits, and in the provision of social service. But the fundamental overriding problem of the war has not repeat not been resolved. Until it is, the survival of Laos as a sovereign and independent nation remains in peril. . . . Therefore, in my view, the period between now and next November is critical . . .[71]

71. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 1714, 180430Z Mar 69.

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PART III:

Air Power Redresses the Balance, 1969–1973 (U)

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Chapter XIII

The Enemy Reaches Muong Soui (U)

(S) The communist offensive at the opening of 1969 caused a great deal of apprehension among State Department officials. The American game plan for Southeast Asia called for de-escalation, but in northern Laos the North Vietnamese were following a different script. Shortly before leaving office, Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy visited the Russian chargé d'affaires, Yuri N. Tcherniakov, to warn that "renewed pressure in Laos could confront the new administration with a very serious problem." Tcherniakov tried to downplay the matter, claiming that North Vietnamese actions were purely in response to "threats" posed by Operation Pig Fat. Bundy countered by observing that a few hundred Meo defending their homeland hardly constituted a threat to North Vietnam. The Russian remained unmoved but promised to inform his government of Bundy's views.[1]

(S) Back in Laos, the communist offensive led to the first public admission of U.S. bombing activities by any top Laotian official. On February 12, 1969, in an exclusive interview with United Press International, Souvanna Phouma admitted that the United States had been bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail and North Vietnamese troop concentrations in northern Laos. According to the prime minister, "we have no other means to stop them [the North Vietnamese]." Souvanna followed up this interview by informing the Pathet Lao representatives in Vientiane that he would halt the American bombing if the North Vietnamese would withdraw from Laos. In reply, the Pathet Lao demanded an "unconditional" halt to the bombing but did not mention the North Vietnamese.[2]

(S) With popular attention focused on South Vietnam, the United Press International story went practically unnoticed by the American public, and the State Department advised Ambassador Sullivan that the "no comment" policy on U.S. military operations in Laos was still in force. The State Department also suggested that, while a bombing halt in northern Laos might be acceptable in exchange for North Vietnamese withdrawal, there was no question of halting operations against the trail until the war in South Vietnam had been resolved.[3]

(S) The communist offensive likewise injected a sense of urgency into a number of USAF programs already under way. One of these was the Raven forward air controller program. There were twelve Ravens assigned to Laos in November 1968, about half of them at Long Tieng. As the pace of the war quickened, the Ravens found themselves overextended and unable to handle all of the available sorties and their obsolete O–1s did not stand up to the primitive conditions at most of the forward sites from which they operated. The crude dirt airstrips tore up the landing gear, while dust and gravel choked the engine. There were no maintenance men or facilities at most of the lima sites. The pilots, occasionally aided by air operations center personnel, performed their own routine maintenance between the one-hundred-hour periodic maintenance trips to Udorn. This procedure proved wholly unsatisfactory, as the O–1s

1. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 8110, Jan 17, 1969.
2. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 140033Z Feb 69.
3. (S) *Ibid.*

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experienced fourteen partial or total engine failures during the last three months of 1968. Such conditions threatened to cripple the entire operation.[4]

(S) Responding to the crisis, PACAF sent a team to Udorn to completely survey the Raven program and its needs. The upshot was an increase in the number of Ravens from twelve to sixteen (later raised to twenty-two), and the number of aircraft jumped from eight to sixteen. Six USAF maintenance men were dispatched to Laos to keep the planes operational between periodic inspections. Colonel Tyrrell used this opportunity to renew his bid for U–17 aircraft but was overruled by PACAF.[5]

(S) To supplement the Ravens (and A–1 FAC aircraft), the Air Force introduced jet forward air controllers in March 1969. Jet FACs had operated in southern Laos since 1967, because hotter North Vietnamese Army antiaircraft fire had driven the slower prop planes from large areas of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In northern Laos, however, AA fire was fairly light until 1969, when, freed from the danger of attack on North Vietnam, the communists moved larger guns into the Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger areas. When the North Vietnamese launched their offensive in January 1969, they covered much of their advance with an impressive array of 37-mm and 57-mm guns besides the usual complement of 12.7-mm and 23-mm weapons. With conditions too dangerous for prop aircraft to operate, the response was to turn to jets. After Lima Site 36 fell, Wolf F–4 FACs from the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing at Ubon began operating in the more heavily defended sectors of eastern Barrel Roll. They were joined by Falcon F–4s from the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Udorn.

(S) The Falcons frequently teamed with Atlanta RF–4s, also from the 432d Wing at Udorn, to combine visual and photo reconnaissance into a single mission. They shared the visual recce task, and the F–4 acted as escort for the unarmed RF–4. When striking a target, the Atlanta RF–4 first took prestrike photos, after which the Falcon F–4 directed the attacking aircraft onto the target. The RF–4 then returned for poststrike photography. The presence of the RF–4 relieved the F–4 of many of its prestrike and poststrike duties, allowing more time to direct the attacks. The immediate poststrike photography also made it easier to assess strike results.

(S) The Atlanta/Falcon combination (later changed to Laredo/Bullwhip) soon proved its superiority to the single jet FAC operating on his own. For example, during a typical week in June, eight Atlanta/Falcon missions controlled fifty-four strikes, 6.75 per sortie, while forty Wolf FACs, acting singly, controlled sixty-seven strikes, or 1.68 per sortie. The photo/visual team also secured better strike results. During the strikes mentioned above, the Atlanta/Falcon teams averaged 1.07 secondary explosions per strike compared to 0.75 for the Wolf FACs.[6]

(S) Along with the Atlanta/Falcon program, the 432d Wing developed a system of "hip-pocket targeting," essentially a local version of the Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force Tiger target list. Before Atlanta/Falcon, the 432d sent photos to Saigon (and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force) for target selection and scheduling. In April, the wing began to retain a copy for rapid readout for potential targets. Lucrative targets falling within the current rules of engagement were identified and placed on an active list. Target folders, including photographs, route mosaics, and other relevant data were assembled and the Falcon forward air controllers briefed. If other targets were not available, the Falcon could hit one of these hip-pocket targets. Other units in northern Laos developed similar procedures, each tailored to its own particular circumstances and capabilities. The net effect was a marked improvement in bombing results. For example, within the first three weeks, the 432d identified and struck twenty hip-pocket targets in addition to those on the regular schedule.[7]

4. (S) Raven FAC Survey, PACAF, Jan 9, 1969.
5. (S) *Ibid.*
6. (S) Msg, 432d TRW to 1st AF, 270704Z Jun 69, subj: Atlanta/Falcon Concept and Schedule.
7. (S) Hist, 432d TRW, Apr-Jun 69, p 14.

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Although the introduction of jet FACs and hip-pocket targeting enhanced USAF capability, bombing in bad weather and at night needed to be improved.[8] Accordingly, the Air Force extended its Loran D coverage to northern Laos. Like the jet FAC program, Loran D had been developed for use in North Vietnam and southern Laos, but the worsening situation in Barrel Roll led to its application there. In essence, Loran D employed a computer aboard an F–4 to measure the time difference between signals received from two pair of radio stations. Maps with a Loran D overlay translated geographic coordinates into loran coordinates for use by the F–4s, allowing bombing of a target regardless of the weather. Commando Nail, a system of radar offset aiming points, used easily recognizable radar returns (mountain peaks, a prominent bend in a river, etc.) as fixed reference points. The bearing and distance from these points to a selected target were set into the F–4 computer, which then guided the aircraft to the proper release point. Like Loran D, Commando Nail was suitable solely against area targets such as truck parks, storage areas, and troop concentrations.[9]

Another effort to upgrade air operations in northern Laos was the introduction in January 1969 of airborne radio direction finding, with EC–47 aircraft monitoring and locating enemy radio transmissions. A detachment of three to five EC–47s had operated out of Nakhon Phanom for some time, chiefly covering Steel Tiger and the adjacent areas of North and South Vietnam. However, as the new electronic sensors assumed an ever-greater role in the Commando Hunt campaign, EC–47 missions were gradually switched to northern Laos. By midyear all five EC–47s were working mostly in Barrel Roll. Besides pinpointing enemy headquarters for air strikes, the EC–47 radio intercepts furnished information on communist strength, logistic structure, and intentions. All of this was to prove extremely useful in blunting the enemy thrust.[10] In the opinion of one forward air controller,

> [Communications intelligence] does a lot for you. Not just where the transmitters were but what they were saying word-for-word. You can gauge—have some ideas what their attitude or what their supply problems are. If a guy is starving to death, leave him alone. Work on his supply lines little. But if some guy is fat and sassy and causing you a lot of trouble, just bomb the shit out of him. Don't waste your assets on a guy who is not doing anything. For example: There was a guy up near Muong Soui named Nguyen who sent a report to Hanoi every night telling about all the bad guys, which were us, they had been killing that day and all the land that had just been taken and all that kind of stuff; and they would just send him all kinds of supplies, ammo, food. Actually that guy never got off his ass. He never did a thing, and we drew a "no bomb" line around him. We didn't want to get rid of him. Just like you never bomb bad gunners.[11]

At this point Colonel Duskin, the Army attaché, saw a chance to expand his service's air role in northern Laos. In May 1969 he convinced Robert A. Hurwitz, the deputy mission chief, that the Army's OV–1 Mohawk (call sign Spud) could enhance intelligence collection in Barrel Roll. With side-looking airborne radar and infrared sensors, the Spud gave a direct readout for an observer in the right seat and recorded the image on the observer's screen for later analysis by photo interpreters. Like the EC–47, the OV–1 had flown in South Vietnam and southern Laos for several years. However, as action decreased in Vietnam and the Air Force turned more to sensors for intelligence in Steel Tiger, the Army found less need for its services. Thus, the Army responded favorably to a request from Vientiane to dispatch two of the aircraft to Udorn. Using

8. Intvw, James T. Bear, Proj CHECO hist, with Col Thomas D. Dejarnette, Asst Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, May 69.
9. Memo, 7th AF/13th AF, subj: Commando Nail Ops in BR, Feb 14, 1969.
10. Talking Paper, 7th AF, ARDF Application in Laos, Jan 14, 1969; Background Paper, 7th AF, ARDF Application in Laos, Sep 20, 1969.
11. Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, p 73.

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infrared sensors to detect enemy bivouac areas and the side-looking airborne radar coupled to a moving target indicator in the cockpit to pick out enemy trucks moving along the roads, the Spud quickly demonstrated its worth at night.[12]

The OV–1s were controlled by the Army attaché, and their missions were not coordinated with either the air attaché or Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. This presented some hazard to USAF aircraft flying in the same area at night, and the OV–1 observers apparently had trouble converting information on their scope to map coordinates that could be passed to the airborne battlefield command and control center. When a Spud returned to Udorn, its film was processed and analyzed by Army photo interpreters who reported their findings to the Army attaché (but not to the air attaché or Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force). This drew a strong protest from Colonel Tyrrell who was being upstaged by the Army attaché at the ambassador's morning briefing. Tyrrell further asserted that withholding information until the formal briefing kept the Air Force from acting on it promptly.

Colonel Duskin had an answer to the problem of responsiveness. He proposed that a detachment of armed helicopters be sent to Udorn to support the OV–1. G. McMurtrie Godley, who replaced Sullivan as Ambassador to Laos, was enthusiastic, but Colonel Tyrrell was apoplectic. The CIA, MACV, and USAF authorities in Udorn and Saigon all lined up against the Army attaché. Armed helicopters were still very much in demand in South Vietnam, and those that the Army could spare were being turned over to the Vietnamese. From Bangkok, Ambassador Unger cabled that while the Thai government was willing to turn its head to the presence of the OV–1s, bringing in armed helicopters was a major escalation that raised "serious questions."[13]

This combined opposition killed the armed helicopter proposal, but the question of how best to use Army (and CIA) intelligence was unanswered. Each agency remained reluctant to share its information with the other, for "security reasons." Each thought it could best exploit its own (and others') intelligence if it were but given the strike assets. Over the years there were numerous attempts to overcome this problem, but they generally foundered on the rock of interservice rivalry. Hence, the data collected by the OV–1 has proven useful to the historian but had no appreciable impact on the conduct of the war.

The 1969 communist offensive also spurred improvement in the Royal Laotian Air Force. Because of Tyrrell's reorganization, T–28 sorties had jumped from 235 in August 1968 to 1,367 by the end of the year—a sixfold increase in just five months.[14] With only fifty-three planes and sixty-one pilots, the Laotians could not sustain this rate, much less reach Tyrrell's desired goal of 2,500 sorties a month. So in February 1969, the air attaché suggested that the number of T–28s be raised to seventy-seven and that forty-eight rather than thirty-six pilots be trained every year. The ambassador was sufficiently impressed with the RLAF's progress—and concerned over the deteriorating military situation—that he vigorously supported the request.[15]

After asking for and receiving more specific justification, CINCPAC recommended that the JCS approve the request. But the Joint Chiefs said no, citing the "worldwide shortage" of T–28s and the greater requirements for T–28s to be used for Vietnamese pilot training.[16]

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12. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to MACV, 140732Z May 69, subj: Use of OV–1 in Barrel Roll, 7th AF to 7th AF/13 AF, 201010Z May 69; MR, DCS/Intel, 7th AF/13th AF, subj: OV–1 Speeds, May 31, 1969.
13. Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, pp 11–13; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to MACV, 261714Z Jul 69, subj: Increased Air Support for Laos, MACV to AmEmb Vientiane, 281310Z Jul 69, subj: Increased Air Support for Laos, AmEmb Bangkok to AmEmb Vientiane, 3472, 281933Z Jul 69.
14. Hist, CINCPAC, 1968, II, 198.
15. Msg, DEPLCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 9043, 111020 Feb 69.
16. Msgs, CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, J5 322, 122247Z Feb 69, subj: RLAF Reorganization, to DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, 260440Z Feb 69, subj: Additional Justification for Increase in RLAF UE, to JCS, J5322, 152055Z May 69, CINCPACAF to CINCPAC, 202028Z Feb 69, subj: RLAF Reorganization, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 100330Z Mar 69, subj: Increased UE for RLAF; JCSM 2344/19, May 16, 1969.

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(S) Challenging the JCS position, the ambassador pointed out to the Secretary of State that there were 911 T–28s in existence (Navy, 538; Air Force, 61; foreign governments, 193; and commercial corporations, 119). Consequently, "it would not seem unreasonable to expect that with the proper effort, imagination, and cooperation within the U.S. government our modest request for an increase of twenty-four aircraft could be met." As to the contention that Vietnamese pilot training took precedence, the ambassador argued, "In Laos we have the only active war in the world in which T–28s form an integral part." If there were not sufficient T–28s for both programs, then "the war in Laos where air power has been proved crucial time and again warrants curtailing the VNAF training program."[17] CINCPAC seconded the embassy, but the request fell on deaf ears in Washington. For the moment at least, Vietnamization took precedence over events in Laos.[18]

(S) One of the reasons Colonel Tyrrell wanted more T–28s was to support an independent Meo squadron stationed at Long Tieng. Ly Lee, de facto commander of the Meo flyers, had already shown that T–28s could operate out of Long Tieng and it was an hour closer to the fighting. In addition a separate Meo squadron with an air operations center/joint operations center would round out the tactical air control system and put Military Region II on an equal footing with the other military regions. At first General Sourith, RLAF commander, opposed the idea. Nonetheless, he realized that the Meo were effectively controlled by General Vang Pao anyway, and a separate squadron would eliminate the social problems of a mixed Lao/Meo unit. He finally came around to Tyrrell's view. The CIA liked the idea of a separate squadron but balked at the establishment of an AOC/JOC. [redacted] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

[redacted] Subsequent events swung the CIA to Tyrrell's side, but a separate Meo squadron did not become a reality until October 1969.[19]

(S) The Meo flyers meantime operated out of Vientiane, nominally as part of the Lao squadron. They faced their first real test during Operation Pig Fat, and Tyrrell's confidence was fully vindicated as the Meo pressed home their attacks when [redacted] the Lao [redacted] refused to fly. In the communist dry-season offensive they kept up the pace, winning a reputation for absolute recklessness. According to one forward air controller, "Their tactic was no tactic. They looked like a swarm of bees when they came in on a target. There was no way to figure them out. Just whoever had an opening would go in. That's the way they fought."[20] Another FAC observed (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

> They would press to the point it was terrifying. Their idea of strafing was sticking a .50 cal in a guy's ear and pulling the trigger. I watched them strafe out 37-mm positions at absolute point-blank range zero—right on the deck, didn't have 20 feet of altitude, and they would make repeated passes. They had more guts than anybody I have ever seen. . . . They set their bomb fuzes for 2-second separation and just blew themselves right out of the air—well, not out of the air, but they would come back with 80, 90, 100 holes in them. They just thought it was funnier than hell. They were something else![21]

(S) In particular, Ly Lee became known as a fearless and indefatigable leader. The Lao normally flew one or two missions a day, [redacted] and the Meo six to eight. Ly Lee would fly ten to twelve mission a day even when he was ill. In many cases, he would not get out of his aircraft between missions. With the engine running, he would have his plane (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

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17. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 3544, 020833Z Jun 69, subj: MASF Laos T–28 Aircraft UE.
18. (S) Hist, CINCPAC, 1969, III, 191–93.
19. (S) Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, pp 13–14.
20. (S) Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Maj Michael E. Cavanaugh, Raven FAC, Nov 21, 1974, p 17.
21. (S) Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, pp 17–19.

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refueled and rearmed while he gulped a handful of gummy rice and washed it down with fiery Meo liquor. When his wingman wore out, he just went on by himself. At the end of the day, he would be so exhausted that he had to be lifted out of the cockpit; yet the next day he would be back for more. He would also carry more bombs than any other pilot.[22] The Americans tried to get Ly Lee to slow down but to no avail. When he was killed in July 1969, he had logged over three thousand combat hours.

(S) Understandably, the Meo loss rate was high. At the time of Ly Lee's death, just one of his original comrades was still alive. Meanwhile, five more had graduated, but a year later three of them were dead and five others had taken their place. By June 1972 only one of these was alive, a cripple, while eleven new pilots had joined the squadron. The saying, "They fly until they die" applied to the Meo more than to any other group. The Meo seemed to know they were doomed and they fought like it.[23]

(S) In a further effort to strengthen the Royal Laotian Air Force, Colonel Tyrrell tried to secure AC–47 gunships. In the interim, he proposed that four Laotian C–47s be converted to gunships by mounting three .50-caliber machineguns, a loudspeaker, and flare dispenser in each aircraft.[24] Although the .50-caliber version offered less firepower than existing USAF gunships, Tyrrell thought it met the Laotian's base defense needs at night, and the inclusion of loudspeakers provided a psychological warfare capability. As envisioned by the air attaché, one gunship would be assigned to each of the four main airfields—Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet, and Pakse.[25]

(S) Considerable correspondence on the C–47 conversion ensued between the embassy, the deputy chief of the military advisory group, CINCPAC, and the Air Force Logistics Command. On February 28, 1969, the Air Force approved the requested modification (but without the loudspeaker) if there were funds. The following month, however, Air Force headquarters advised that funds were not available. As a substitute, it offered eight C–47s and a like number of surplus SU–11 miniguns, 7.62-mm weapons that fired six thousand rounds per minute with a muzzle velocity of 2,750 feet per second. The first five of these aircraft were due to arrive in July, the other three in October.[26]

(S) In the meantime, Seventh Air Force agreed to make four USAF AC–47s available from the 4th Special Operations Squadron. The embassy at Vientiane had been trying for quite a while to get USAF gunship support, but the aircraft it had in mind was the AC–130 Spectre. During Operation Pig Fat, Tyrrell had asked for Spectre night support but Seventh Air Force turned down the request due to the requirements of Commando Hunt. While the battle for Lima Site 36 was being waged, the embassy renewed its request and an AC–130 was diverted from Steel Tiger. Over the following months, other Spectres were now and then diverted into Barrel Roll to cope with an emergency but none were regularly scheduled. For one thing, Commando Hunt had first priority and only a desperate situation in the north coupled with bad weather in the south justified shifting the Spectre. Then, too, the AC–130's armament was most effective against vehicles while the need in Barrel Roll was for night defense of isolated lima sites and other close air support missions. For this role, Seventh Air Force felt the older (and less expensive) AC–47 Spooky was better suited.[27] In addition, the Spooky gunships could be spared

22. (S) *Ibid.*
23. (S) Scott intvw Apr 6, 1973, p 43.
24. (S) While in the United States, Colonel Tyrrell had become aware that the Air Force Logistics Command was experimenting with this configuration.
25. (S) AF Div Hist Sum, Apr 1–Sep 30, 1968; hist, CINCPAC, 1968, p 323.
26. (S) AF Div Hist Sums, Oct 1–Dec 31, 1968, Jan 1–Mar 31, 1969; hists, CINCPAC, 1968, p 324, 1969, pp 208–9.
27. (S) The AC–47 carried three 7.62-mm miniguns. The AC–130 carried four of these and four 20-mm weapons. Later versions of the AC–130 substituted two 40-mm guns or one 75-mm cannon for two of the 20-mm guns.

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because of the falloff of combat in South Vietnam. The embassy continued to favor Spectre but accepted the AC–47s. The first two came to Udorn on March 11, 1968, and were joined by two more four days later. The Spookies flew night support for General Vang Pao, and the C–47 training team used one of them during the day to instruct Laotian gunship crews.[28]

The gunships had an instant and dramatic impact. They flew their first mission on March 13 in defense of Lima Site 1 and devastated the North Vietnamese. For months the Spookies saw almost continuous action, winning praise at every turn. Between March and October, the AC–47s flew 376 sorties in support of 383 government positions, none of which fell. On the night of March 20, for example, three AC–47s supporting Lima Site 32 were credited with killing 175 enemy. Two weeks afterwards a single Spooky, responding to a Laotian ground team, struck an enemy staging area near Lima Site 50. After the strike, ground troops saw the communists carrying away a "large number" of dead and reported that the target area was drenched in blood. On April 25 the Spookies were back at Site 32 beating off another communist assault. Again the enemy was reported "carrying hordes of dead and wounded out of the area" owing to the gunship strikes.[29]

Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force deemed the gunships "the deciding factor" in preventing the collapse of friendly positions north of the Plain of Jars, and a 4th Special Operations Squadron message said:

> Since the arrival of Spooky, no major sites have fallen. Probably as important as the damage inflicted on the enemy is the psychological effect of the Spookies on the defenders. The value of the AC–47 has been widely publicized in the northeast and the guerrillas have complete faith in the reliability of the system. Consequently, troops on the ground have stiffened their resistance to heavy enemy attacks that would have been successful in other years.[30]

In fact, the guerrillas may have become too enamored of the gunships. Sometimes ground commanders may have called on Spookies needlessly—just to drop a few flares to scare off a real or imagined enemy in the area or to put on a firepower demonstration to make their own men feel more secure.[31]

The improvements in air operations came none too soon, for by March 1969 conditions were critical for the Laotian government. With about two months left in the dry season, the enemy seemed to have the time and resources to drive toward the Meo heartland southwest of the Plain of Jars or to push westward toward the neutralist stronghold at Muong Soui. The collapse of Lima Site 36 left only the lightly held crescent formed by Lima Sites 50, 6, and 32 stood in his way. In the embassy's view, the loss of Muong Soui and Long Tieng would "seriously shake the fragile government here and could lead to its upset."[32]

At this juncture the allies were handed a sudden stroke of good fortune. A North Vietnamese defector disclosed that the chief enemy thrust would come north of the Plain of Jars toward Muong Soui. The offensive was to begin on March 23 with an attack on the lima site crescent. In particular, the North Vietnamese 924th Regiment had orders to seize Lima Site 32 and kill everyone in it—men, women, and children.[33]

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28. Talking Paper, 7th AF/13th AF, Spooky Gunships, May 69; msg, 4th SOS to 14th SOW, 200437Z Mar 69, subj: AC–47 Employment in Thailand.
29. *Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969* (Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1969), pp 22–23.
30. Msgs, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 141130Z Mar 69, subj: AC–47 Gunship Employment in Barrel Roll, 4th SOS to 14th SOW, 191413Z May 69, subj: Flight Operation Summary.
31. Intvw, James T. Bear, Proj CHECO hist, with Lt Col Alan F. Crites, 4th SOS, Jul 2, 1969.
32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 260902Z Mar 69, subj: Operation Rain Dance.
33. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 110746Z Mar 69, subj: Situation Report, MR II. This was a sharp departure from previous practice. Normally each side sought to surround the other on three sides, always leaving the defenders the option of withdrawing or fighting to the end.

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Believing the crescent could not withstand a major attack, Vang Pao decided to forestall it by launching an all-out offensive on the Plain of Jars. Souvanna Phouma approved the plan and joined Vang Pao in a personal appeal for "massive air support." Embassy officials judged the scheme completely impractical, given the disparity in forces and exhaustion of the Meo. Mr. Hurwitz, deputy mission chief, dubbed the idea as "an act of desperation reminiscent of the last German counteroffensive in the winter of 1944." The Americans finally got Vang Pao calmed down and Hurwitz said the general was "reverting to the old Vang Pao, guerrilla leader par excellence, after briefly flirting with the role of Vang Rundstedt."[34]

As an alternative, the embassy suggested a modest three-day air campaign (Operation Rain Dance) against transshipment points, base camps, storage areas, and headquarters in what had always been restricted areas on the eastern edge of the plain. It was hoped the enemy would construe the air strikes as the prelude to a counteroffensive and return to defend his sanctuaries, easing pressure on the lima site crescent. To reinforce the illusion of an offensive, Vang Pao would carry out ground probes toward Route 4, southeast of the plain, and Route 7 to the northeast.

In the first truly effective joint effort, CIA, air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force planners developed 345 targets. In contrast to past operations, the targets were grouped into target complexes each covered by a single mosaic photo map. Individual targets within a complex were given a priority and outlined on the mosaic. Target coordinates and priority were annotated next to the target itself. The mosaics were then numbered and briefed to the Raven forward air controllers on March 15. Using this system, one FAC could be assigned to direct strikes on Mosaics 1 and 2 while another worked 10 and 11. This afforded an element of target control and ensured geographic separation.

The request to Seventh Air Force was for eighty sorties a day starting on March 17. Sixty sorties would support the Ravens while the other twenty struck targets along Route 7. General Brown okayed the plan but pared the sorties to sixty-five. Souvanna Phouma also approved and lifted the bombing restrictions on the Plain of Jars except for a six-mile circle around the towns of Xieng Khouangville, Phong Savan, and Khangkhai.[35]

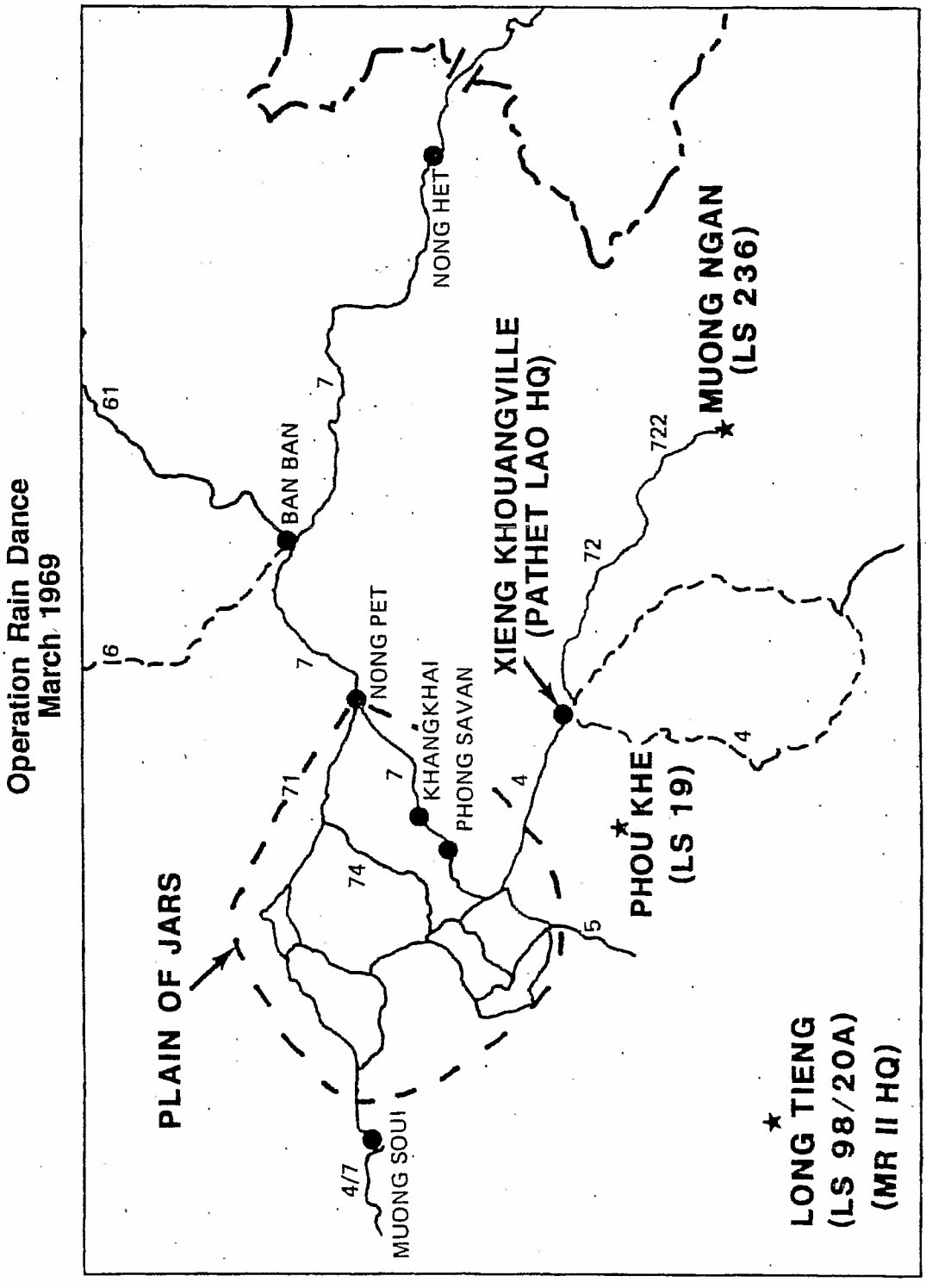
The results of Rain Dance surpassed the Americans' wildest expectations. Although only seven targets were struck the first day, forward air controllers reported "hundreds of secondary explosions as stockpiles of ammunition were destroyed and large POL fires started."[36] Since these sanctuaries had never been hit before, the communists had done little to conceal or protect their stores and they were very vulnerable to air strikes. With results on March 18 as impressive, Seventh Air Force opted to extend the operation "as long as resources are available, lucrative targets exist, and weather permits."[37] By March 20, 261 USAF and 43 RLAF sorties had caused 486 secondary explosions, 244 fires, 44 POL fires, and 3 road cuts. There were 570 structures destroyed and 75 damaged; 28 bunkers and over 160 feet of trench were demolished. Also wiped out were 700 pounds of supplies, a 105-mm howitzer, 6 gun positions, 25 pack animals, and a radio station.[38] Five days later, Colonel Tyrrell reported that 192 (55 percent) of the original targets had been destroyed,[39] but as important as the individual strike results was the systematic destruction of the targets.

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34. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 240554Z Mar 69, subj: M–16 Rifles and Sec Green's Visit.
35. ( ) Background Paper, 7th AF/13th AF, Maj Gen Vang Pao's Planned Offensive, n.d. [ca Mar 69]; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 191249Z Mar 69, subj: Operation Rain Dance, 7th AF to AIG 8272, 161437Z Mar 69, subj: 7AF Weekly Operating Intentions (Mar 18–24, 1969).
36. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 191249Z Mar 69.
37. ( ) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 270734Z Mar 69, subj: Situation Report, MR II.
38. ( ) *Ibid.*
39. ( ) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 250417Z Mar 69, subj: Situation Report, MR II.

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Behind this aerial assault, Vang Pao began his ground attack on March 23. The initial objective was Lima Site 19 about eleven miles southwest of Xieng Khouangville. From there he sent out patrols to harass Route 4 between Xieng Khouangville and the Plain of Jars. With the methodical destruction of supplies and the disruption of communications, the enemy could not counter this move and fell back into the remaining sanctuaries, principally Xieng Khouangville and Khangkhai. By the end of the month, Vang Pao had occupied Phou Khe (Lima Site 19) and Meo patrols were probing along Route 4 and onto the southeastern edge of the plain.[40]

Coincident with this southern "feint," guerrilla teams from lima sites north and south of Route 7 moved to cut that artery. Bombing in this area had not been as intense as farther south, however, and the enemy easily repulsed these assaults. The communists proceeded with their attack on the lima site crescent, even though they must have known their plan had been compromised. The North Vietnamese seized Lima Site 50 and nearby Lima Site 50A on March 14, but a combination of gunships and tactical fighters smashed the assault on Lima Site 32. Later that same day, the Meo were able to reoccupy Sites 50 and 50A.[41]

Even so, the embassy viewed the situation as "extremely critical." It was still too soon to determine the impact of Rain Dance. Vast amounts of supplies had been destroyed, but so far there had been no ground reaction. Souvanna was worried too; at a cabinet meeting on March 25, he chose to remove the remaining restrictions on the Plain of Jars except for a 820-foot circle around the Chinese cultural mission in Khangkhai.[42] The prime minister informed Hurwitz, deputy mission chief, that if these strikes did not slow the communist advance he would request B–52 strikes in the north.[43] Two days later, the State Department assented to these changes but said B–52 strikes would not be approved.[44] Seventh Air Force, too, was wary of stepping up the tempo of air operations in the north. On March 28 Maj. Gen. David C. Jones, Seventh Air Force deputy chief of staff for operations, warned General Seith that too much air power could "whet their appetites for air to the extent they fall back and count only on air." He went on to request the Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force deputy commander to use his influence to moderate further requests.[45]

Despite these reservations, Seventh Air Force kept up its support. Forty F–4s and F–105s hit Xieng Khouangville, demolishing fifty buildings and most of the supplies stored there. By the time Rain Dance officially ended on April 7, Colonel Tyrrell reported that 80 percent of the original targets had been destroyed by a total of 730 USAF and RLAF sorties. The remaining targets and 150 new ones were furnished to the Ravens, and the embassy asked Seventh Air Force to schedule sixty sorties a day until all of these targets were wiped out.[46]

Heartened by Rain Dance, which had yielded the most impressive results ever in Laos, Seventh Air Force scheduled fifty sorties a day for the rest of the month. Two of these missions achieved especially spectacular results. On April 15, EC–47s located a major enemy headquarters on the Plain of Jars. Twenty-six jets hit this complex the next day, completely knocking out the headquarters. A few days later, a [redacted] reported a cave loaded with fuel on the southeastern

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40. ( ) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 100315Z Apr 69, subj: Situation Report, MR II.
41. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 260902Z Mar 69, subj: Operation Rain Dance.
42. ( ) The mission had been established in the early 1960s. When Laos formally recognized Peking in 1964, the king directed all Chinese officials to move to Vientiane and to close all other establishments. CIA reports revealed that the Chinese had complied and the cultural mission building had been turned over to the Pathet Lao. Since then it had served as a major storage facility. Inasmuch as Souvanna was wary of any action that might offend the Chinese, the mission remained off limits.
43. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 260902Z Mar 69, subj: Operation Rain Dance.
44. ( ) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 280036Z Mar 69.
45. ( ) Ltr, Maj Gen David C. Jones, DCS/Ops, 7th AF, to Maj Gen Louis T. Seith, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Mar 28, 1969.
46. ( ) Msg, AIRA VIentiane to DIA, 100315Z Apr 69.

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edge of the plain. A flight of F–105s on April 21 managed to put a Bullpup missile through the mouth of the cave. The forward air controller described the explosion as the largest he had ever witnessed. Explosions coming from the mouth of the cave and ventilator shafts on the top of the mountain continued for sixteen hours, and a village over half a mile away erupted in a ball of fire—the communists had dug an access tunnel from the village to the cave.[47]

In the wake of these air actions, the Meo pushed deeper into enemy territory. What began as a diversion had developed into a major advance. Yet during the entire operation, Vang Pao never used more than one thousand men (three battalions). The Meo had not fired a shot in anger nor suffered a single casualty because air strikes had simply rendered the enemy's position untenable. On April 29 the Meo walked into Xieng Khouangville unopposed—the first time government forces had occupied the town since 1962. Meantime, another Meo force took over Ban Muong Ngan, and all the territory southwest of Routes 4 and 72 was in government hands as were vast stores of materiél left behind by the communists.

The loss of Xieng Khouangville finally forced the foe to shift some forces away from the lima site crescent toward Xieng Khouangville. By mid-May these troops were beginning to make their presence felt, and Vang Pao decided it was time to withdraw. Meanwhile, three fresh NVA battalions were reported to be on their way to Laos with orders to take Muong Soui "or die trying."[48]

To cover his withdrawal and intercept the North Vietnamese reinforcements, Vang Pao elected to renew his earlier efforts to cut Route 7. Seventh Air Force was once more asked to assist the operation. In response, CIA and USAF officials worked out a scaled-down version of Rain Dance scheduled for five days beginning May 22. Called Stranglehold, it included 150 identified targets, with additional targets to be developed as the campaign unfolded. Because Route 7 had always been open to air strikes, the Stranglehold targets were better dispersed and camouflaged and more heavily defended than those associated with Rain Dance. The Americans therefore anticipated the results would be less striking but, if successful, would have greater long-term significance.[49] Seventh Air Force was requested to furnish fifty sorties a day over and above the seventy already scheduled into Barrel Roll. Saigon approved the plan but selected only seventy-five of the recommended targets, and reduced the sorties to ninety for all of Barrel Roll.[50]

Unfortunately, the ground operation met the same fate as its predecessor although guerrilla teams did briefly enter Ban Ban and Nong Pet. The air attacks, however, extracted a high price from the foe. During the five-day operation, 250 sorties struck 68 of the planned targets, demolishing or damaging 516 structures and touching off 296 secondary explosions, 142 fires, and 70 POL fires. It also destroyed 16 antiaircraft artillery sites, 14 trucks, 5 mortar positions, and 2 tanks.[51]

By the end of May, Vang Pao had completed his withdrawal and the communists resumed control of all ground lost in Rain Dance. It appeared, however, that the enemy offensive against Muong Soui had been forestalled and air power was given the major credit. Between November 1968 and May 1969 the Air Force had flown over 11,000 sorties in Barrel Roll (up

47. Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 291432Z Apr 69, subj: Barrel Roll Operations Summary, Apr 7–28, 1969; Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969, p 34; Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, p 80; Cavanaugh intvw, Nov 21, 1974, p 6.

48. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 091151Z Jun 69, subj: Critique of Dry Season Offensive.

49. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 181013Z May 69, subj: Tactical Air Support.

50. *Ibid*; msgs, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 191732Z May 69, subj: Operation Stranglehold, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 280323Z May 69, subj: Situation Report, MR II.

51. Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 280323Z May 69, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 020634Z Jun 69, subj: Operation Stranglehold.

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from 5,000 the year before). Laotian sorties had also doubled (from 4,943 to 9,818). According to the embassy, "The RLAF and USAF, cooperating splendidly, constituted the decisive factor in thwarting the enemy."[52]

As the rains commenced and progovernment and communist forces sparred inconclusively along the western edge of the plain, the embassy concluded that major operations were at an end. Actually the main enemy blow was about to fall. Taking advantage of the poor weather, which hampered air operations, the North Vietnamese chose to bypass the lima site crescent and to strike directly at Muong Soui. This was the first time the communist forces had attempted a wet-season offensive. Normally, the heavy rains favored the government by bogging down the foe's logistics while providing numerous holes for helicopters and tactical fighters to support the airmobile guerrillas. Even so, the improved communist road network enabled the enemy to move men and supplies forward in spite of the rain. Further, the rain, during mid-June, afforded few openings through which air strikes could pinpoint and destroy troop concentrations. The failure of Stranglehold also apparently convinced the communists they had nothing to fear from the lima sites to their rear.[53]

The North Vietnamese mounted their offensive on June 18, and three battalions ringed Muong Soui by the twenty-fourth. The four thousand neutralist defenders outnumbered the attackers three to one, but the neutralists were notoriously unreliable and the North Vietnamese had tanks. A three-hundred-man [redacted] artillery battalion and one hundred Meo served as a stiffener for the neutralists. On the morning of June 24 the enemy, supported by six tanks, launched the main assault. A fortuitous break in the weather let thirty-four jets, fourteen A–1s, and twenty-nine RLAF T–28s hit the attackers, destroyed three tanks and damaged another, and held the enemy at bay. Nevertheless the neutralists, who had suffered two killed and sixty-four wounded, deserted the eastern perimeter of the artillery compound and the North Vietnamese captured three 155-mm and five 105-mm howitzers.

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That night, AC–47s and tactical fighters broke up a concerted ground and mortar attack, but weather closed in the next morning to curtail air support to eleven sorties. The FAN began a wholesale desertion, but fortunately, the enemy did not renew the assaults. By June 26, just five hundred neutralists remained to defend the site, and that night two hundred more slipped away. Weather crimped air activity as only thirteen sorties could find targets.[54]

Because of the mass desertion, the Americans decided to evacuate the remaining defenders on June 27. A force of twenty-four helicopters assembled at Long Tieng to carry out the evacuation, designated Swan Lake. It included two UH–1s and five CH–3s from the 20th Special Operations Squadron, three CH–53s from the 21st Special Operations Squadron, three HH–53s from the 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron, and eleven Air America H–34s.

At dawn on the twenty-seventh the North Vietnamese renewed their attack, spearheaded by four tanks. Clearing weather enabled twenty-one USAF and fifteen RLAF fighters to maul the enemy, but the government position was basically hopeless. At two in the afternoon the order was given to implement Swan Lake, and the evacuation got under way an hour and a half later. By nightfall, 231 Thai, 51 Meo, and about 200 dependents had been airlifted to safety at Long Tieng. The rest of the forces withdrew overland covered by AC–47 gunships.

During the evacuation A–1s supplied air cover, but the helicopters still had to descend through heavy ground fire to make their pickup. One CH–3 from the 20th Special Operations

52. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 091151Z Jun 69; study, AmEmb Vientiane, subj: Mission Assessment of Dry Season, Jun 16, 1969.
53. *Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969*, p 55.
54. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 241215Z Jun 69, subj: Muong Soui, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 270801Z Jun 69, subj: Situation Report, Muong Soui.

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Squadron was hit and crashed. The crew and passengers fought off the North Vietnamese with M–16 rifles and grenades until rescued by another helicopter.[55] Although the loss of Muong Soui was a disheartening chapter in the annals of Laotian warfare, the air strikes by U.S. and Laotian pilots took a heavy toll of the enemy. The air attaché had special praise for the helicopter crews:

> No praise can evaluate the aircrews of the unarmed and vulnerable helicopters who time and time again descended into the enemy-controlled areas at minimum altitude and airspeed, crammed their burdens into the overgrossed machines and staggered out of the area to the Long Tieng sanctuary. We were extremely fortunate under the circumstances to sustain only the loss of a mechanical instrument and no loss of life. These deeds should not go unnoted to the men of the Air Force helicopter units and their comrades Air America, Inc.[56]

The saga of Muong Soui did not close with Swan Lake. During the evacuation, a Raven forward air controller, Capt. Michael E. Cavanaugh, and a Meo observer had been directing air strikes to the far east near Ban Ban. Like most Ravens, Cavanaugh worked the area until he had barely enough fuel to make it back to Long Tieng. Arriving over his home base, he could not land because the weather had closed in. Too short on fuel to reach either Luang Prabang or Vientiane, he advised Long Tieng, "I am hurting." Another Raven, one of the last to leave Muong Soui, informed Cavanaugh that some fuel was still stored in a bunker not far from the east end of the runway but that the North Vietnamese had occupied the field. With the one alternative a crash landing in the mountains or on the plain, Captain Cavanaugh settled on a try for Muong Soui. An A–1 in the area was assigned to fly cover. While the A–1 strafed to pin down the enemy, Cavanaugh landed and taxied as close as he could to the bunker, which contained several fuel barrels and a hand pump. Picking the closest barrel, pilot and observer rolled it to the airplane. Cavanaugh later recalled:

> [We] took that barrel of gas and rolled it 200 yards up hill at a great rate of speed. It's amazing how much strength you have when you are scared to death. I probably couldn't budge it now. But we got the barrel up to the airplane. It was dark and raining now and they were shooting mortars at us. They were dropping mortars on the runway and the fragments were hitting all around us. You could hear them going by.[57]

Using the barrel of his pistol as a wrench, Cavanaugh got the cap off the barrel and put in the pump. With his Meo partner manning the pump, Cavanaugh filled just the right wing tank because the other was already riddled with shell fragments. The plane drooped to one side but it would have to do. Since it was now completely dark and the instrument panel had been destroyed, the covering A–1 dropped napalm on the opposite end of the runway as a marker. Cavanaugh lined up on this point and gave the O–1 full throttle. As he remembered, "With no instruments I couldn't tell what our speed was. I just waited until it sounded right and then lifted off. I got the thing airborne and headed for Luang Prabang."[58] For their action, the two A–1 crewmen were recommended for the Air Force Cross. Captain Cavanaugh received the Silver Star.[59]

Laotian and American officials in Vientiane considered the loss of Muong Soui critical. Souvanna and Hurwitz agreed that the communist offensive was a major escalation demanding an instant response. General Vang Pao quickly readied plans to retake Muong Soui using sixteen

55. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 270801Z Jun 69; *Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969*, pp 55–56; hists, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1969, pp 14–15, 20th SOS, Jan-Jun 69, pp 28–30.
56. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 291417Z Jun 69, subj: Situation Report, Muong Soui Evacuation.
57. Cavanaugh intvw, Nov 21, 1974, pp 41–42.
58. *Ibid*, pp 42–43.
59. *Ibid*; hist, 56th SOW, Jan-Jun 69, pp 10–12.

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hundred men (six hundred Meo, seven hundred neutralists, and three hundred FAR). The Laotian general staff, underscoring the seriousness of the situation, for the first time allowed Lao troops to serve under a Meo commander. Colonel Tyrrell sought sixty sorties a day starting on June 30 to support the operation which was christened Off Balance. The allies hoped this prompt, organized action would catch the communists by surprise.[60]

(S) Beyond the ground attack, the prime minister wanted a singular action to show he was determined to punish continued aggression. Removing restrictions, he requested a major strike on the previous sanctuary of Khangkhai. He desired an "air armada" of 150 planes to hit the heart of the town on July 1, "with emphasis on destroying all structures and other immediate area targets." For the next day, he wished a follow-on strike against the town's periphery by an additional 150 aircraft. In sending this proposal to Seventh Air Force, the embassy noted, "It is essential that this exemplary and devastating blow be obviously recognized by the communists as the Royal Laotian Government's answer to their calculated act of escalated aggression."[61]

(S) A copy of this request went to the State Department where Deputy Assistant Secretary Charles T. Gross saw that the proposed bombing was more than a mere tit-for-tat response and required high-level approval. Since it was Saturday morning in Washington, Gross felt this could not be obtained until Monday—which would be too late. He therefore ordered Hurwitz to hold off, saying the bombing of Khangkhai "constitutes considerable escalation and change in ground rules. Such changes require high-level . . . decision which is impossible to obtain on a weekend."[62]

(S) State, Defense, and CIA officials met on Monday to review the concept for retaking Muong Soui as well as the proposed strike on Khangkhai. They approved the former "as part of the continuing battle," but disapproved the latter. Washington officials judged it "unwise to risk escalation in Barrel Roll when the enemy holds all the tools for re-escalation." The message also pointed out that the embassy could not extend the free-strike zone unilaterally—a request had to be submitted to CINCPAC with full justification and then to Washington for final approval—and State could see no advantage at that time in extending the free-strike zone or attacking the center of Khangkhai. The results of such a "spectacular retaliatory raid" would not outweigh the political repercussions of destroying the Chinese cultural mission. The embassy was further cautioned not to let the RLAF bomb Khangkhai, since the attack would be seen as inspired by the U.S.[63]

(S) Apologizing to his superiors for the apparent mixup, Hurwitz said he thought he had been acting within his authority. He also passed on to Seventh Air Force the restriction on bombing Khangkhai.[64] There is no indication that Seventh Air Force would have approved the strike in any event. Even so, the episode reopened the old question of Defense versus State authority over military operations in Laos. Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird wrote the Secretary of State on July 14,

> We concurred in your 2 July guidance to Chargé and specific disapproval of his request for a spectacular retaliatory air raid.
>
> (S) I believe our mission in Vientiane erred in this case by independently directing significant escalatory action, and I hope that the point can be made with all concerned

60. (S) Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 290800Z Jun 69, subj: Occupation of Moung Soui, 291330Z Jun 69, subj: New Free Strike Zones, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 290949Z Jun 69, subj: Military Plans to Recapture Muong Soui.
61. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 291120Z Jun 69.
62. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 271710Z Jun 69, subj: Free Strike Zone.
63. (S) Msg, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 109132, subj: Political Assessment of Military Response to Fall Muong Soui, Jul 2, 1969.
64. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 021157Z Jul 69.

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> that review at the highest level, as well as our approval in advance, is necessary before operations of this character and magnitude are undertaken.[65]

(S) Secretary Laird's letter was fielded by Winthrop G. Brown, former Ambassador to Laos, who still wore the scars of his many battles with Admiral Felt over ambassadorial authority. Brown gave his suggestions to Under Secretary Elliott L. Richardson, since Secretary of State William P. Rogers was in Paris for the Vietnam peace talks. He told Richardson that Ambassador Godley, who had recently arrived in Vientiane, could be expected to moderate future requests. However, Brown believed Defense was trying to diminish the role of the ambassador and get into the act itself.[66] Having chastised Hurwitz through State Department channels, Richardson felt compelled to defend him against the Defense Department. He therefore informed Secretary Laird on July 25 that while agreeing "military action should be reviewed if out of the ordinary," he considered Hurwitz as having been within the rules in requesting the Khangkhai raid. He reiterated the position that it was "essential that the ambassador remain as the responsible senior U.S. official in Laos."[67] Not to be put off, Laird replied:

> I appreciate your views. My main concern, however, is of a more basic nature. We must insure that any escalatory action and extension of U.S. military participation are reviewed at the highest level before implementation. This may require new procedures of operating authority.
>
> (S) My staff is reviewing current operating authority and rules of engagement. The Air Attaché is hosting an 11 August conference on simplified rules of engagement. After this review we may wish to establish new authorities and procedures, including a high-level Washington group to approve or deny proposed escalatory actions.[68]

(S) Richardson agreed to review any proposed changes in operating authority in consultation with the Defense Department. He suggested, however, that State and Defense seek comments from Vientiane and the appropriate military commanders before or after this review.[69] This final ploy succeeded in muting the issue for the present, but it was clear that in the future Washington officials would take a more direct hand in military operations in northern Laos.

(S) Ironically, while this sparring was going on in Washington, the Chinese cultural mission (which had sparked the whole issue) was inadvertently destroyed by one of those freak accidents that seemed to characterize so much of the war in Laos. In early August, radio intercepts revealed a Pathet Lao radio station located in a building just three hundred yards from the cultural center. Because the station was so close to the restricted area, embassy and Seventh Air Force officials made elaborate plans to ensure against any short round. A Raven FAC would identify and mark the target, and an F–4 equipped with a laser beam would "illuminate" the target for a second F–4 carrying a one thousand-pound laser-guided bomb. All three planes arrived over the target on schedule and the illuminator placed his beam on the building. The second F–4 released the bomb "in the basket" formed by the reflected laser beam. Just then a small cloud drifted between the illuminator aircraft and the target, scattering the light beam. Confused, the "smart" bomb followed the strongest ray—straight into the cultural mission! The explosion destroyed the cultural mission (which was loaded with high explosives) and leveled every building within a quarter of a mile, including the radio station.[70]

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65. (S) Ltr, SECDEF Melvin R. Laird to SECSTATE William P. Rogers, Jul 14, 1969.
66. (S) Memo, Winthrop G. Brown, Ambassador to Laos, to Elliott L. Richardson, Under Secretary of State, Jul 23, 1969.
67. (S) Ltr, Under Secretary of State Elliott L. Richardson to SECDEF Melvin R. Laird, Jul 25, 1969.
68. (S) Ltr, SECDEF Melvin R. Laird to Under Secretary of State Elliott L. Richardson, Aug 7, 1969.
69. (S) Ltr, Under Secretary of State Elliott L. Richardson to SECDEF Melvin R. Laird, Sep 3, 1969.
70. (S) Cavanaugh intvw, Nov 21, 1974, pp 13–14.

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[redacted] Seventh Air Force braced for the accustomed blast from the embassy. But Ambassador Godley, far from seeking to "moderate" military action, was even more aggressive than Sullivan in prosecuting the war. Consequently, he waited for a reaction from the Chinese—who said nothing. Either they were unaware of the strike or felt it would be difficult to explain their presence in violation of the king's orders. As time passed and the war swirled on, the incident quickly faded from memory. A month later Godley replied to a polite inquiry from State, saying there was no confirmation of a strike on Khangkhai in mid-August.[71]

[redacted] Meantime, General Vang Pao's drive to capture Muong Soui had failed. The attack got under way on July 1, backed by fifty USAF sorties that destroyed thirty-nine bunkers, two buildings, one antiaircraft position, and caused eighteen secondary explosions and twelve fires. Behind this barrage, the Meo were reported to be making good progress although neither the FAR nor FAN supported the assault. Initially, weather was more of a problem than the enemy as no strikes were flown on the second or fourth and only twenty-four on the third. On July 5, the skies cleared enough to permit thirty U.S. and thirty RLAF aircraft to hit the enemy positions, enabling the Meo to move within three miles of their objective. Weather once more closed in and the advance ground to a halt as just six aircraft (two USAF and four RLAF) were able to strike on July 8. Then, on the eleventh, the neutralists finally moved out—south, away from Muong Soui.[72]

[redacted] That same day, Ly Lee fought his last duel with an antiaircraft gun. One observer said "a 37-mm caught him and just hosed him all the way to the ground." In his eighteen months, Ly Lee had amassed over a thousand missions and had won the admiration of all who knew him. One Raven forward air controller later commented, "He was the only man I ever cried over when I heard he was dead." Ly Lee was also posthumously (and secretly) decorated by the United States government, one of the few Laotians to be so honored.[73]

[redacted] Colonel Tyrrell used the occasion of Ly Lee's funeral to further his efforts to bring the Lao and Meo together. At his suggestion the entire FAR high command was invited to Long Tieng. This was the first time Lao officers had been allowed into the Meo/CIA base, and most were surprised to find that the Meo were not wallowing in CIA dollars. Instead they found a group of scraggly, ill-equipped teenagers and old men living in makeshift facilities. Being an excellent politician in his own right, Vang Pao arranged for a Buddhist funeral ceremony although Ly Lee was buried according to Meo custom rather than being cremated. Vang Pao also took the opportunity to discuss future plans and politics with his contemporaries.[74]

[redacted] The desertion of the neutralists effectively ended the Off Balance operation. Nevertheless, Vang Pao still had hopes of taking Muong Soui with the Lao reinforcements that had been promised by Ly Lee's funeral. The communists, meanwhile, were busy reinforcing their own positions. During the first two weeks of July, pilots and roadwatch teams reported eight tanks and over one thousand trucks moving toward Muong Soui. Apparently the North Vietnamese high command had ordered a major concentration at Muong Soui, and was stripping troops from other sectors to accomplish this. On July 13, these forces launched a counterattack behind tanks and heavy artillery. Without air support, the Meo swiftly abandoned their offensive and fell back to defensive positions south of the Ngum River. The government, only two weeks after losing Muong Soui, had suffered yet another defeat.[75]

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71. [redacted] *Ibid*; msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 161430Z Sep 69, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 180936Z Sep 69.

72. [redacted] Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, pp 39–41; msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 021156Z Jul 69, subj: Operation Off Balance, 141300Z Jul 69, subj: Operation Off Balance.

73. [redacted] Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, p 41; Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, p 17; *New York Times*, Oct 26, 1969, p 27.

74. [redacted] Hartley intvw, Jul 14, 1974, p 16.

75. [redacted] Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, p 41; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 150619Z Jul 69, subj: Operation Off Balance.

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Chapter XIV

Air Power Provides a Temporary Respite (U)

The collapse of the Off Balance operation caused a near panic among the Laotians. Intelligence reports disclosed that the North Vietnamese had massed nineteen battalions (seventy-nine hundred combat troops) plus four thousand support personnel and sixty tanks around Muong Soui. Another seven battalions (five NVA and two PL) were seen massing in the Xieng Khouangville/southwest Plain of Jars area. Most of these troops belonged to the veteran 316th Division and had been drawn from other areas of Barrel Roll. At least three battalions, however, and most of the armor had come straight from North Vietnam. Roadwatch teams and USAF pilots likewise reported steady and heavy traffic on all of the major roads leading to Muong Soui.[1]

Defector and prisoner interrogations further revealed that the communists planned to move west from Muong Soui to cut the road between Luang Prabang and Vientiane. This would isolate the royal capital from the administrative center, but neither would be directly attacked. The North Vietnamese would next swing south to seize the Meo stronghold of Muong Kassy and the neutralist headquarters at Vang Vieng. The capture of Vang Vieng would remove the last vestige of neutralist influence and outflank the Meo headquarters at Long Tieng. A second prong would push down Route 4 to complete the encirclement of the Meo heartland.[2]

The allies assumed (incorrectly, as it turned out) that this attack would come during the wet season.[3] As subsequent events showed, the communists actually planned to hold their position at Muong Soui and build up their supplies for a conventional dry-season offensive. This miscalculation on the part of the allies was matched by a more serious one by the North Vietnamese. The failures of Stranglehold and Off Balance apparently convinced the communists there would be no more wet-season operations and their supply lines were safe. They therefore stripped their rear areas bare to furnish the concentrations of men at Muong Soui and Xieng Khouangville. This left a virtual vacuum stretching from the Plain of Jars all the way back to Samneua and Nong Het, with just a sprinkling of engineering troops and dissident neutralists to support the supply system. These two miscalculations combined to produce the most dramatic reversal of the war—Operation About Face.

Souvanna Phouma believed the projected communist offensive was meant to topple this government. He told Ambassador Godley the Pathet Lao would use the fall of Vang Vieng to acquire the portfolios currently held by the neutralists. This would assure them of a majority voice in the cabinet and mark the end of the Geneva accords (and of the U.S. bombing in southern Laos). Souvanna looked to the United States for aid in this crisis, to include increased air support, M–16 rifles, and M–41 tanks. Unless such aid was forthcoming, the prime minister warned, he would be forced to reorganize the armed forces and form a "national neutralist party" to negotiate with the communists.[4]

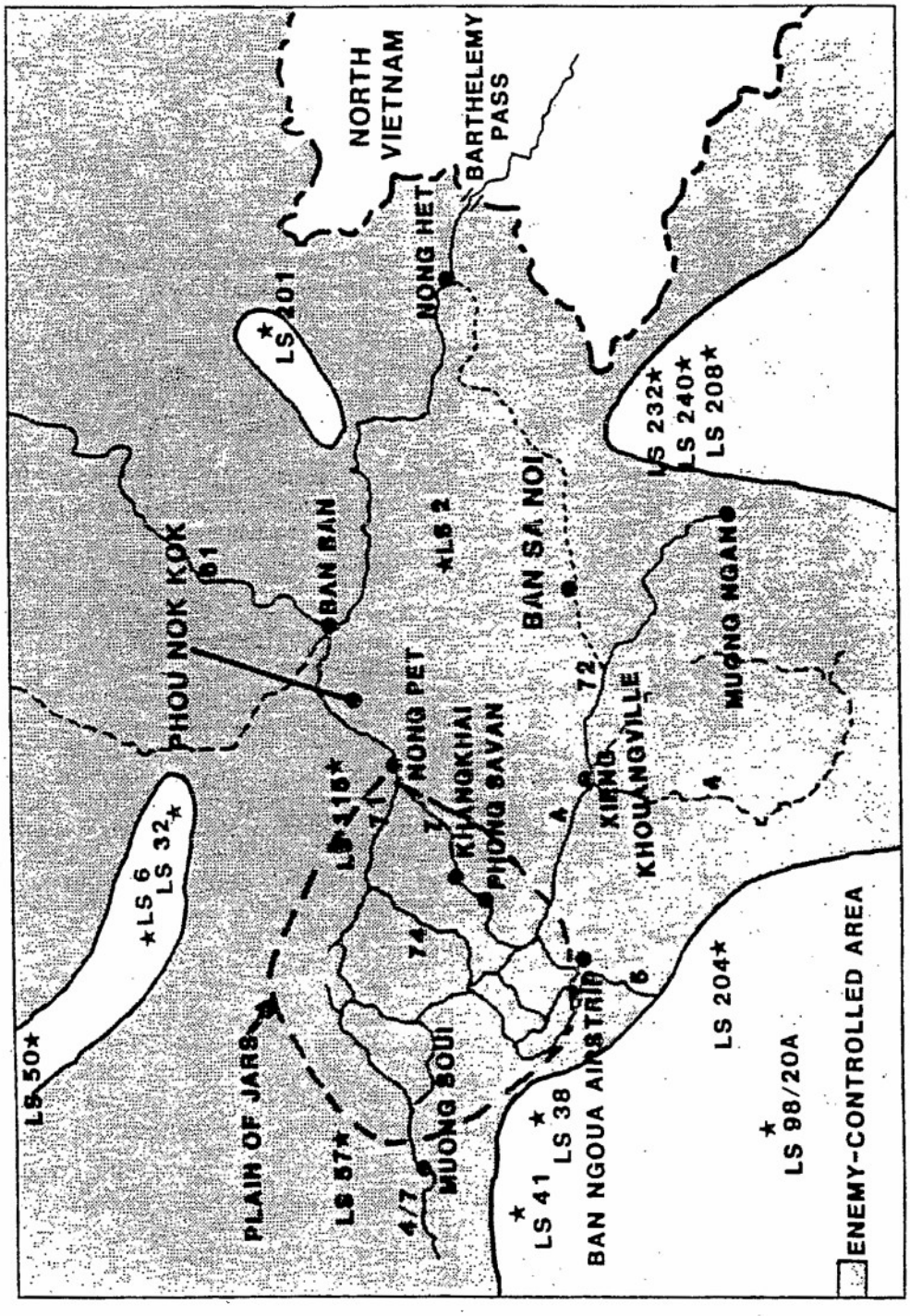
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1. [redacted] Msgs, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 160510Z Jul 69, subj: Armed Recce of Routes 7/4 and 71, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 160915Z Jul 69, subj: Enemy Intentions in North Laos.
2. [redacted] Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 160915Z Jul 69.
3. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 171020Z Jul 69.
4. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 170750Z Jul 69, 171120Z Jul 69.

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Air Power Provides a Temporary Respite

On the military side, General Vang Pao advised the Americans his depleted Meo could not withstand another onslaught. "There are not enough Meo to fight for all of Laos," he said. He was even considering moving his people to Thailand where the government had given him "assurances." The only chance of stopping the enemy was by "massed air sorties" to include the use of B–52s. General Oudone, FAR chief of staff, echoed Vang Pao's sentiments, telling Colonel Tyrrell, "Only airpower can stop the enemy's present offensive to take over the government."[5]

At a cabinet meeting on July 16, 1969, the Laotian generals demanded that Souvanna break diplomatic relations with North Vietnam, order a general mobilization, arrest the Pathet Lao in Vientiane, and ask for more U.S. assistance including "intensive bombardment by great means [i.e., B–52s]." Ambassador Godley appreciated the seriousness of the situation but thought the cabinet proposals, except for greater air support, were ill advised. Nevertheless, he directed Tyrrell [redacted] to cooperate with Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force in preparing a "saturation air campaign" based on the Rain Dance model. If this failed to stop the communists, he informed the State Department, B–52s should be considered.[6]

(b)(1) STATE

Defense, State, and CIA officials in Washington met to mull over the matter. They agreed there was no suitable or effective military response to an all-out communist offensive. The Joint Chiefs restated their position that defense of Laos was ultimately up to the Laotians; U.S. actions were supplementary. The "best feasible military approach" was continued use of air power—but not B–52s. The chiefs went on to warn: "Military means alone are insufficient. The Laotians' problem can best be kept manageable by a mixture of means—diplomatic, political, economic, and military." The State Department concurred and suggested diplomatic steps be taken to restrain the North Vietnamese. The embassy was also instructed to advise Souvanna not to request B–52s, since this might complicate the Paris peace talks.[7]

Ambassador Godley responded by softening his earlier dire appraisal. He admitted there was no proper military reaction to an all-out offensive, but now said the enemy did not plan one. Instead, the ambassador thought the communists would try to isolate Luang Prabang, capture Vang Vieng, and crush the neutralists. Against these "limited" objectives, he considered the proposed air campaign had a reasonable chance of success by attacking the one vulnerable chink in the enemy's armor—his exposed lines of communication. Diplomatic efforts, he warned, would be unproductive until the ground situation stabilized.[8]

If diplomatic overtures were to be made, the ambassador suggested the State Department approach the Soviets to see if they would restrain the North Vietnamese in exchange for reducing bombing in Barrel Roll from one hundred to fifty sorties a day. State did not like the idea. A direct approach to the Russians would indicate that Souvanna (and the North Vietnamese) were mere puppets. The department further contended that Souvanna should sound out the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris to see what they would concede if the bombing was reduced. Godley in turn did not think much of State's idea. "Let's not get Souvanna ahead of us on these negotiations," the ambassador cautioned, "he might give away too much." In reply, the department pointed out it could not prevent Souvanna from negotiating with the communists, "so let's get him in step with us." However, State recognized that the communists probably had more to gain by resuming their offensive than by negotiating. So it consented to the proposed air campaign, since there was no suitable or effective diplomatic means to restrain the communists.[9]

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5. Msgs, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 160915Z Jul 69, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 161542Z Jul 69, subj: Air Attache Evaluation of Requirement for Air Sorties.
6. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 170420Z Jul 69, 180430Z Jul 69, 181155Z Jul 69.
7. Msgs, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane, 162337Z Jul 69, 171845Z Jul 69, 172350Z Jul 69; JCSM 2344/153, Aug 19, 1969.
8. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 171020Z Jul 69, 171145Z Jul 69, 181155Z Jul 69.
9. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 271145Z Jul 69, 311319Z Jul 69, SECSTATE to AmEmb Vientiane,

[redacted]

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The air attaché, the CIA station chief, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force had prepared the plans for the air campaign, named Operation About Face. Essentially an enlarged version of Rain Dance, the plan called for two hundred sorties a day to interdict Route 7 between Ban Ban and Nong Pet, to conduct armed reconnaissance along the roads leading from North Vietnam into Ban Ban, and to destroy enemy supply bases around the Plain of Jars. Special stress was put on interdicting Route 7, and a series of chokepoints were identified where terrain made it hard to bypass road cuts. These interdiction points would be hit systematically day after day using two thousand-pound laser-guided bombs and Bullpup guided missiles to break up the road surface and crater the subsoil. The rains were then counted on to complete the job by washing away the weakened roadbed. Delayed-action bombs and wide-area antipersonnel mines would be used to hamper repair efforts. This technique had been employed for years in southern Laos, but About Face was its first regular application in Barrel Roll.

To support the air campaign, a three-phase ground operation was planned. During the first phase, guerrillas from Lima Site 32 would move to Lima Site 115 just north of Route 7. At the same time, forces from Lima Site 2 would occupy Phou Nok Kok overlooking the road from the south. From these positions, patrols would move out to intercept and harass enemy efforts to repair or bypass the road cuts. The second but simultaneous phase was to "apply pressure" on the southern part of the Plain of Jars. Meanwhile, the third phase would maintain pressure in the Muong Soui area. Significantly, the plan did not call for any attempt to recapture Muong Soui or move onto the plain itself. The objective was merely to blunt the expected enemy offensive. Thus the ground plan was even less ambitious than either Rain Dance or Off Balance.

As part of the campaign, eight RLAF (Meo) T–28s were moved to Long Tieng (Lima Site 20A) and an air operations center set up. [redacted] the Lao squadron at Vientiane would also take part. Airlift support would come primarily from Air America, although USAF helicopters would be available if needed.[10]

(b)(1)
(b)(3)
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CIA

When the plan was explained to General Vang Pao, who had been despondent since Off Balance's failure, his enthusiasm returned and he immediately began drawing lines on his plotting chart. As an added sweetener, the embassy decided to reequip six of his best battalions with M–16 rifles. The FAR also agreed to send reinforcements from south Laos, even though one high Laotian official warned "battalions from other areas would not find fighting in MR II congenial."[11]

The ground operation was planned to begin on July 24 and last three weeks. Record rains, however—forty-six inches compared to a norm of sixteen—caused a series of delays that held up the ground forces for nearly a month. In some respects the delay was fortuitous, since it allowed the cumulative effect of the bombing to build up before the ground forces started to move. Between July 15 and August 15, Seventh Air Force scheduled an average of 200 sorties a day into Barrel Roll (150 by day and 50 at night). As a rule, 30 sorties were assigned to strike such fixed targets as truck parks and storage and bivouac areas. Between 50 and 80 sorties were controlled by Raven forward air controllers for striking troop concentrations and targets of opportunity near friendly forces. The remainder conducted armed reconnaissance of the route running north and east of Ban Ban or hit the chokepoints on Route 7.

The weather proved less of a hindrance to the Air Force. On an average, 132 sorties were able to strike their targets. Air operations would have been hampered more except for the all-weather bombing techniques introduced the previous year. Of the 4,142 attack sorties flown over the period, 62 used Combat Skyspot[12] to hit their targets, 80 employed Loran D, and 532 utilized

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290138Z Jul 69, 311456Z Jul 69, 020103Z Aug 69.

10. Memo, 7th AF/13th AF, subj: About Face Operations Plan, n.d. [ca Aug 69]; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, pp 46–47.

11. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 181155Z Jul 69.

12. A radar-controlled bombing system developed from a radar scoring system used to evaluate bombing

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offset aiming points (Commando Nail). These sorties destroyed 101 trucks, 1,848 structures, 45 antiaircraft positions, and accounted for 320 road cuts and 1,084 secondary explosions. The interdiction program was further enhanced by the addition of three AC–130s each night. These three gunships alone accounted for 63 of the trucks destroyed during the period. Besides the attack sorties, the Air Force flew nearly 2,000 combat support sorties. Included were forward air control, reconnaissance, airborne radio direction finding, search and rescue, ABCCC, tanker, and flare missions.[13]

While weather delayed the ground phase of About Face, a final planning meeting brought General Brown back to Udorn on August 11 for his first face-to-face meeting with Ambassador Godley. (He also met and was very impressed with Vang Pao who was flown in especially for the occasion.) The meeting's main purpose was to simplify the rules of engagement in anticipation of the forthcoming Commando Hunt campaign in southern Laos (Commando Hunt III). The "simplified" rules, however, still ran to fifteen pages. The principal impact on Barrel Roll was elimination of the armed reconnaissance sectors. In their place, northern Laos was divided into three areas conforming more closely to the geographic and military situation.

In Barrel Roll North, an area generally covering the Chinese road, air strikes and reconnaissance missions were banned unless requested by the embassy and approved by CINCPAC and the JCS. Ground fire could be returned only when specifically authorized by the embassy, save for rescue and infiltration/exfiltration missions. These aircraft could return fire from any area except an active village, in which case embassy permission was required.

Barrel Roll East was the focus of the current About Face interdiction effort. Within this area, armed reconnaissance was authorized within 219 yards of any motorable road up to the North Vietnamese buffer zone. Beyond the 219-yard limit and outside the buffer zone, targets had to be validated by the embassy or a forward air controller/forward air guide and strikes had to be controlled by FAC, FAG, or be conducted using all-weather bombing techniques. Strikes inside the buffer zone were prohibited unless in support of friendly lima sites when requested by the embassy and authorized by Seventh Air Force. No strikes were permitted within 547 yards of an active village, unless receiving ground fire or supporting troops in contact. Ground fire could be returned from any area other than Samneua. Napalm could be used against any motorized vehicle, antiaircraft site, or when specifically allowed by the embassy. Sensors and area-denial munitions could be dropped on any motorable road. All strikes on Barrel Roll East would be monitored by College Eye EC–121 aircraft to ensure compliance with these rules and to prevent violation of the buffer zones.

In Barrel Roll West, all targets had to be validated by the embassy (usually by the air attaché) or by a Laotian observer either in the air or on the ground. Strikes had to be controlled by a forward air controller/forward air guide or by all-weather bombing systems. Napalm and area-denial munitions required specific authorization from the embassy. Ground fire could be returned only under FAC/FAG control, but search and rescue and infiltration/exfiltration missions could return fire received from any area other than an active village. The prohibited area around Vientiane was enlarged slightly, the area around Luang Prabang reduced, and Khangkhai and Phong Savan remained off limits.

Several special operating areas were created in which strikes were permitted without FAC control against any military activity outside an active village. In essence these were armed reconnaissance areas, and napalm was permitted against any motorized vehicle, antiaircraft site, or when specifically authorized by the embassy.

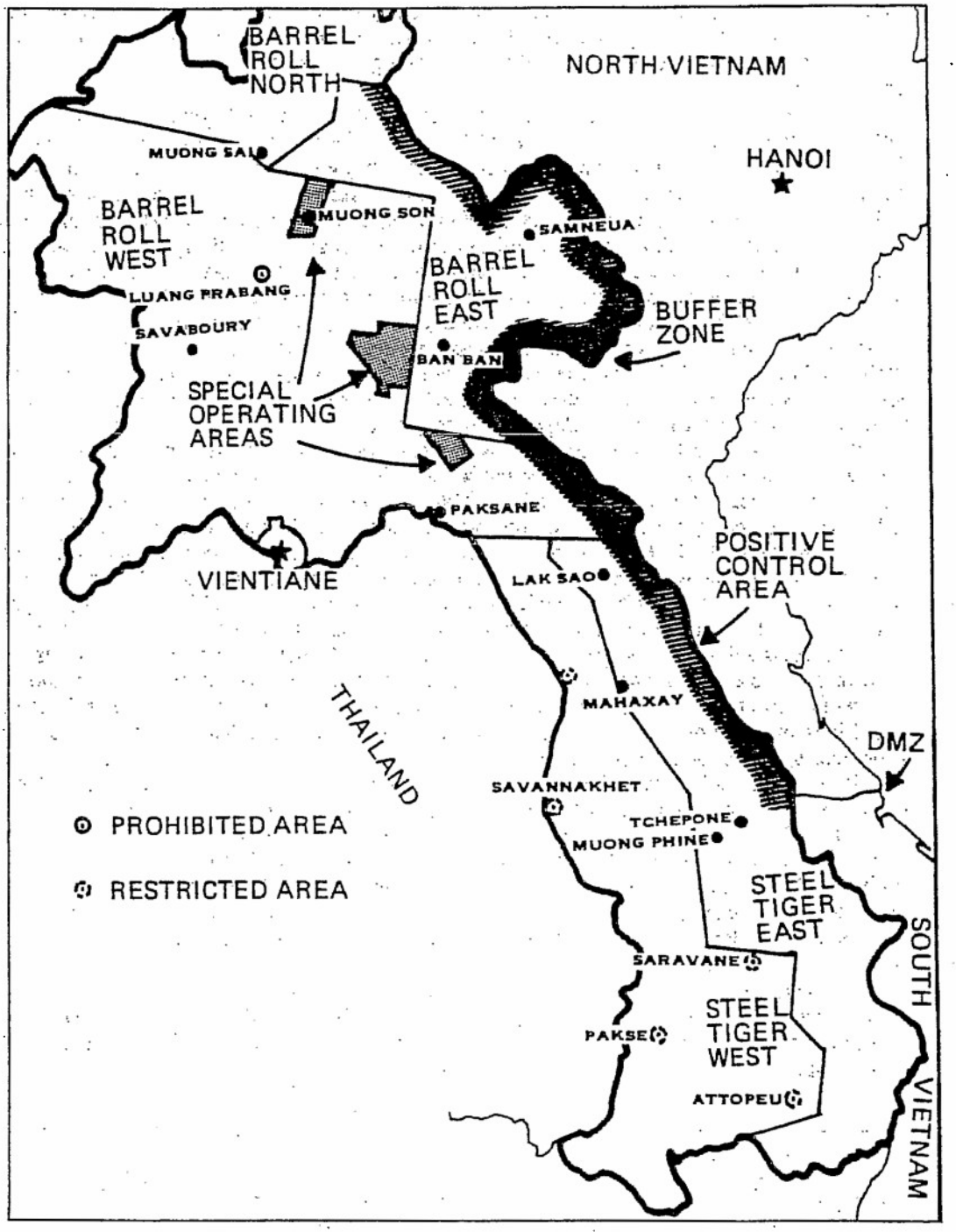
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accuracy.

13. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LX, 2–1 thru 2–7, LXI, 2–1 thru 2–7; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, pp 48–49; msgs, 7th AF to CINCPACAF, 020610Z Aug 69, subj: Status and Analysis Report, BR/SL, Jul 16–31, 1969, 180742Z Aug 69, subj: Status and Analysis Report, BR/SL, Aug 1–15, 1969.

UNCLASSIFIED

Operating Areas in Laos
August 1969



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(S) Targets requiring validation fell into two types—preplanned and targets of opportunity. Preplanned targets included both hard and soft targets. The embassy validated hard targets—truck parks, bridges, bivouac and storage areas, and added them to the target list. Seventh Air Force then scheduled strikes on the basis of recommendations from the Barrel Roll Working Group and its own targeting division. Soft targets were usually acquired by visual or photo reconnaissance in conjunction with ground operations. They were suitable for a onetime strike and, when validated by the embassy, were passed to the Ravens or jet forward air controllers for the next day. (Hip-pocket targets fell into this category.) Targets of opportunity were perishable or fleeting ones like trucks, boats, or personnel. They had to be struck at once or be lost for good, so Laotian observers were authorized to validate them on the spot. If no Laotian was available the target could not be hit. These rules governed just U.S. aircraft; the Laotian were exempt because it was their country and their people. Even so, the air operations center commanders were told to encourage the Laotians to observe the American rules insofar as possible.[14]

(S) The rules of engagement conference also laid plans for the much delayed ground operations now set for August 15. General Vang Pao was convinced the weather would clear on that date, though USAF forecasters predicted at least two more weeks of rain. General Brown consented to continue air operations as long as needed to achieve the ground objective. As Vang Pao foresaw, August 15 dawned bright and clear; and for the rest of the operation, only sporadic rain marred the otherwise clear skies. The interdiction forces immediately began to move toward Route 7. By August 19, the force from Lima Site 2 reached the base of Phou Nok Kok where they met their first resistance. Heavy air strikes by RLAF T–28s broke up this opposition and by the twenty-first the guerrillas has secured the mountain. That same day the troops from Lima Site 32 walked into Lima Site 115. From these two positions teams were dispatched along Route 7, only to learn from villagers there had been no vehicles on the road since July 31. The Air Force had done its job well, and the road had been closed for three weeks before the ground contingent arrived.[15]

(S) The Air Force also took advantage of the weather to establish three sensor strings (six sensors each) along Routes 7 and 61. An EC–121 was shifted north from Steel Tiger to relay data from the sensors to the infiltration surveillance center at Nakhon Phanom. Like so many other programs in northern Laos, the sensors had first been developed for use in the south. About Face marked their initial use in Barrel Roll. Data from the sensors confirmed the absence of traffic but did disclose considerable road repair and portering on trails that bypassed the road cuts. Nonetheless, a problem soon arose with the relay orbit. If the EC–121 flew far enough north to pick up the Barrel Roll sensors, it was too far from the southern fields to effectively relay their data, and vice versa. This drawback, together with the low level of vehicle traffic in the north, led the Air Force to discontinue the Barrel Roll sensors on September 20.[16]

(S) The second phase of About Face got under way on August 20. Nine battalions (six Meo and three FAR) marched toward the Plain of Jars, as three battalions (two Meo and one neutralist) advanced on Muong Soui. During the first week, the communists held the government troops to just five miles. Some intelligence analysts said it was beginning to look like a repeat of Off Balance.[17] Then, suddenly, resistance virtually collapsed. Only in the Muong Soui sector did the enemy continue to offer effective resistance. By the first of September, the original aims of About Face had been attained. Route 7 was interdicted and ground teams were in place to

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14. (S) Conference Report, PACAF, Rules of Engagement Conference, Laos, Aug 18, 1969; ltr, AIRA Vientiane to All AOCs, subj: Rules of Engagements and Targets, Sep 23, 1969; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXII, 2–5 thru 2–10.
15. (S) Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, pp 48–49.
16. (S) *Ibid*, pp 50–51.
17. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 210540Z Sep 69, subj: Situation Report, Enemy Reaction.

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harass enemy efforts to bypass or repair the road. Vang Pao's main force was poised on the edge of the Plain of Jars and Muong Soui was ringed on three sides.

The reason for this dramatic reversal gradually emerged. The air campaign of the past six weeks had completely disrupted the enemy's over-extended lines of communication, making resupply of forward units well nigh impossible. A North Vietnamese officer, captured on September 4, said his four-hundred-man unit with six tanks had only forty rounds of ammunition and fifty gallons of fuel when Vang Pao attacked. Another prisoner revealed that his unit had received no medical supplies or fresh food since August 18. A truck mechanic disclosed that his transportation company had been without fuel and spare parts since the end of July. Still others told of their units suffering from hunger and malaria, as well as a shortage of clothing, blankets, arms, and ammunition stemming from the interdiction strikes.[18]

In describing the success of About Face, the embassy was effusive in its praise of the Air Force:

> Department and others may have noted in recent communications references to efficacy of USAF air in recent operations in PDJ area. We may never know precisely the degree to which air contributed in sustaining the war-weary outnumbered and outgunned FAR forces. But all concerned here in Vientiane are convinced that without the USAF's remarkable effort the enemy would still be maintaining his pressure and from far, far deeper in friendly territory.[19]

General Vang Pao added his praise in a letter to General Brown:

> Operation About Face could have barely begun had it not been for the many and excellent United States Air Force strikes that overwhelmed the enemy and forced him to flee in terror. The fighting for the Plain of Jars would have been long and sanguine struggle had the enemy not been battered and demoralized by the airstrikes, and About Face is therefore a victory for the United States Air Force as well as for the Lao Government.[20]

With the original objectives in hand and no opposition in sight the embassy decided to expand the operation to take in the capture of Muong Soui and the occupation of the plain. There was no intention to hold the plain indefinitely. Rather, the aim was to force the communists into the hills east of it, and keep supply lines closed as long as possible to stave off the inevitable counterattack.[21]

As friendly troops pushed out onto the plain, they met only scattered resistance. One forward air controller described it as "a fantastic sight—three thousand men walking upright across the Plain of Jars."[22] The enemy recognized the danger to the exposed positions and ordered a general withdrawal, but the bombing that had stopped traffic entering the battle area now blocked the traffic trying to get out. The communists were caught in a trap, partly as a result of miscalculations on both sides, but chiefly due to the effective bombing campaign.

The bulk of the enemy infantry was able to withdraw to the hills, but most of the supplies and heavy equipment had to be abandoned. Precise casualty figures for the communists may never be known. Certainly some individuals succeeded in making their way on foot to secure areas in the north and east. Many others undoubtedly died in the mountains from starvation, disease, and exposure, or at the hand of hostile tribesmen. Still others were overrun by the Meo

18. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, pp. 54–56.
19. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 090348Z Sep 69.
20. Ltr, Maj Gen Vang Pao to Gen George S. Brown, Oct 7, 1969.
21. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Operation About Face, Sep 6, 1969.
22. Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, p. 27.

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before they had a chance to withdraw. In any event, it was another year before the North Vietnamese 316th Division again appeared in northern Laos.

The Meo captured Phong Savan and Khangkhai on September 9 after a token struggle. Three days later, they walked unopposed into Xieng Khouangville, and on the twenty-seventh the neutralists went into Muong Soui—the enemy had departed seven days before. As the Meo spread swiftly across the plain, they uncovered a vast amount of materiél left behind by the fleeing enemy. This included 5,000,000 rounds of ammunition, 6,000 weapons, 25 tanks, 113 other vehicles, 300 tons of medical supplies, and 200,000 gallons of fuel—enough to supply the communist forces for six months. Air strikes had not touched most of these supplies, but the communists could not distribute them due to the disruption of the road network and the absence of transportation.[23]

Throughout September the Air Force and RLAF continued to furnish close air support against isolated pockets of resistance. The Air Force alone flew 4,323 sorties and the RLAF added 1,831.[24] To advance USAF effectiveness against enemy troop concentrations, the air attaché and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force planners, working with the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Udorn, developed a tactic known as Snare Drum. Because most air strikes occurred during daylight, the communists used the period just before dawn and after dusk to wash, cook, and take care of biological needs. During these periods they did not envision any air attack. The idea of Snare Drum was to catch the foe by surprise with a single high-speed pass by sixteen to twenty-four F–4s. To produce the most lethal concentration over a wide area, a combination of CBU–24 antipersonnel bombs and five-hundred-pound general purpose bombs was used. A Laredo forward air controller from Udorn guided the strike formation to the target area, followed by a Bullwhip RF–4 to obtain poststrike photographs.

The first Snare Drum mission was flown on September 11, but poor weather in the target area prevented accurate bomb damage assessment. However, the second mission on September 18 was termed "a resounding success" by the Central Intelligence Agency. Agent reports revealed the attack inflicted "very heavy casualties" among about a thousand communists. In contrast, a mission on September 22 touched off only five secondary explosions. The attacks continued through October and November but with such mixed results that the Snare Drum tactic was abandoned.[25]

With the rapid shifts of the ground situation in Barrel Roll, the recently revised rules of engagement were rendered obsolete before they went into force.[26] To keep pace with the ground force and avoid short rounds, a series of Raven "boxes" were formed around the major friendly units. Within these boxes, a Laotian observer could validate any target and the Ravens controlled all air strikes. (At night, A–1 FACs replaced the Ravens in the boxes while aircraft outside the boxes struck targets in accordance with the published rules.) This was the heyday of the Ravens. Never before or after did they enjoy the degree of authority or control the number of aircraft as they did during About Face. Even so, the heavier responsibility imposed greater demands and the Ravens pushed themselves well beyond the normal limit. In September, for example, the low man flew 156 hours and the high man had 210.[27] Moreover, the Ravens had a high attrition rate. During About Face, four of the eleven Ravens assigned to Long Tieng were shot down and only one was rescued.[28]

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23. *Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969*, p 89.
24. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXII, 2–3.
25. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, pp 33–34.
26. The new rules of engagement were published on August 18 and became effective on September 27.
27. Regular Air Force crewmembers as a rule flew between 30 and 60 hours a month. Regulations set a limit of 100 hours a month, but in an emergency this could be extended to 125.
28. Polifka intvw, Dec 17, 1974, pp 32–34.

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About Face also gave the Ravens a chance to get in their own licks as fighter pilots. Using rockets, grenades, and twenty-pound fragmentation bombs (carried inside the plane and dropped out the window), the "Raven Escadrille" attacked enemy pockets whenever other strike aircraft were not available. In late September, Colonel Tyrrell secured three T–28s for the Ravens. The T–28 offered obvious advantages over the O–1, greater endurance, more powerful engine, and armor around the cockpit. Fitted with two .50-caliber machineguns, the plane could carry bombs and marking rockets. However, its low-wing configuration limited visibility, and its faster speed was as much a handicap as an asset in the FAC role. Hence, most of the Ravens preferred to stay with the O–1. Nonetheless, three Ravens were sent to Udorn for a quick checkout (three missions totaling four hours and thirty minutes) by Water Pump.

Officials at Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force opposed the use of T–28s by the Ravens. In the first place, they felt the temptation to exploit the aircraft's strike capability would detract from the primary forward air controller mission. Then, too, there was a legalistic problem. Technically, all unarmed FAC missions were classified as "combat support" (marking rockets were not considered "armament"). If the aircraft carried machineguns or bombs, however, it was classed as "combat." The Ravens, like all U.S. military personnel in Laos, were forbidden to take part in "combat"—but not "combat support." The Ravens asked, "What the hell is the difference," and there was no answer.[29]

All the same, Maj. Joseph W. Potter, the Long Tieng AOC commander, tried to keep his men in line. He told them, "I will give you a couple of days to have fun shooting the guns and then don't do it anymore." As one FAC noted, "Of course he knew he was [talking to the wind] because none of us ever came back with any ammo."[30] Actually it was Major Potter who had the last word. When one of the Ravens, Capt. Michael E. Cavanaugh, gained a reputation for flouting the rules, Potter quietly brought him to heel. One day as Cavanaugh was preparing to taxi out on a mission, Potter walked up to the plane and downloaded the guns while a nonplussed pilot sat fuming in the cockpit. Cavanaugh later recalled: "Joe had a very effective way of saying, 'You are a FAC and not a fighter pilot.' He taught me to be conservative and stay within my role and remain a forward air controller and stay out of the hunter/killer business—but damn, it was a temptation."[31]

Coincident with, but not related to, About Face, government troops in southern Laos scored an equally surprising success. What started out as a minor probe in July gradually grew into a full-scale offensive to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail from the ground. A guerrilla company stole into Ban Tang Vai on July 29 to feel out the foe's strength in the area. When the communists failed to react, the rest of the battalion was flown in along with a company of regular Laotian troops. While the Laotians stayed to garrison the village, the guerrillas scoured the countryside where they met scattered opposition. Laotian T–28s and USAF A–1s flew cover for the operation, accruing two hundred sorties between July 28 and August 28. The tangible outcome of these strikes was secondary to their sustaining the morale of the friendly troops.[32] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

Owing to the light communist response, [redacted] decided to expand the operation, now christened "Junction City, Junior." The plan specified that three guerrilla battalions take over the village of Muong Phine at the junction of Routes 9 and 23. The village, marking the western fringe of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, had been in enemy hands since 1962. For air cover [redacted] asked for two FACs, twelve A–1s, and one flareship per day beginning on September 1. As usual, advance coordination was nil and the air support request went in at the last minute. This (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

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29. [redacted] *Ibid.*
30. [redacted] *Ibid.*
31. [redacted] Cavanaugh intvw, Nov 21, 1974, p 17.
32. [redacted] Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 220135Z Sep 69, subj: Sitrep, Junction City Jr.

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caused a one-day delay, but the operation evolved smoothly thereafter. On September 7, the guerrillas entered Muong Phine, having encountered token opposition that was easily brushed aside by air strikes.[33]

This action apparently surprised the foe; forty-five men were captured in Muong Phine, as well as two thousand tons of supplies and numerous documents. Perhaps more significant was the number of refugees who queued up at the airstrip for evacuation from the area. During the next week, Air America and USAF helicopters lifted over fifteen hundred of these people back to Muong Phalane and later to Savannakhet.[34]

The easy success of the operation led to its extension. This time, the goal was to cut the main artery of the Ho Chi Minh Trail near Tchepone, while regular Laotian troops advanced northward to join the guerrillas in the vicinity of Tchepone and try to enter the city. If successful, this would block the trail and compel the North Vietnamese to bring in reinforcements that could be destroyed by air strikes. With many aircraft usually operating in the area, no extra air support was needed beyond two forward air controllers to handle diverted strike aircraft.[35]

The guerrillas departed Muong Phine on September 29 and arrived at their objective two days later. Here the enemy drove them back to a ridge overlooking the road, where they waited for reinforcements. The thrust from Military Region IV had meanwhile got as far as Toumlane before being halted by the communists.[36] The friendly forces did not know it at the time, but Junction City, Junior, had reached its high-water mark.

Despite the apparent success of About Face and Junction City, Junior, the long-term outlook for Laos was no brighter than it had been a year before. To be sure, the communists had been surprised and dealt a serious blow, but the North Vietnamese had more than enough reserves to replace their losses. The government forces were scraping the bottom of the barrel, and Vang Pao was becoming overextended. There were simply too few Meo to hold the Plain of Jars or even to defend Long Tieng against a concerted enemy drive. If the government was to have a chance of "staying in the ball game," he said, "it must get more mileage from its regular forces."[37] Two days later, the ambassador unveiled a comprehensive "Blueprint for Improving RLG Military Forces." This plan called for a major reorganization of the armed forces, better pay and benefits, more training in Thailand, and modern equipment like tanks and heavy artillery.[38]

The plan further specified the formal establishment of a Meo squadron and an increase in T–28s to 112: 15 aircraft for each of the four Laotian squadrons, 9 aircraft at Long Tieng, 22 for Water Pump training, 11 to the Ravens as replacements for O–1s, and 10 would be converted for photo reconnaissance. Once this expansion was complete, another 36 planes a year would be needed to replace combat losses. (This meant the embassy was projecting an attrition rate of fifty percent of the combat force each year!) To support the greater number of aircraft, the embassy proposed a step-up in pilot training. Classes would be reduced from eighteen to fifteen students and the training course compressed to three and a half months. This would turn out sixty pilots every fourteen months in lieu of the present thirty-six a year. As the RLAF attained full strength, the embassy recommended eliminating the Thai pilots. Over Colonel Tyrrell's objection, the plan envisioned a halt in the RLAF gunship program in favor of continued use of USAF AC–47s and AC–130s.[39]

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33. *Ibid.*
34. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, pp 40–41.
35. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to DIA, 220135Z Sep 69.
36. Weekly Laos Summary, 7th AF/13th AF, Sep 27–Oct 30, 1969, Oct 4–10, 1969.
37. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 131127Z Sep 69.
38. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE,150833Z Sep 69, subj: Blueprint for Improving RLG Military Forces.
39. *Ibid*; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 250900Z Sep 69; Tyrrell intvw, May 12, 1975, p 86.

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[redacted]

The War in Northern Laos

The "Blueprint" touched off another major policy review in Washington. In general, the State Department deemed Godley's proposal too expensive. It suggested instead that Thai participation on the ground be increased, beefing up both infantry and artillery. State also favored more Thai pilots and, in a reversal of its earlier position, the use of B–52s rather than building up the RLAF. The Joint Chiefs of Staff strongly opposed the employment of B–52s and any greater outside participation. They agreed with the ambassador that ultimately the Laotians would have to stand on their own feet. The JCS did recommend, however, that RLAF expansion be held to the seventy-seven aircraft originally requested by Ambassador Sullivan a year earlier, and that the RLAF gunship program be kept. [redacted] In any case it could not be done without a formal request from Souvanna Phouma, something which Ambassador Godley said would not be forthcoming.[40]

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In the end, President Nixon accepted the JCS position. For the moment B–52s were out, the Meo squadron was in, and twenty-two additional T–28s were authorized for Laos. The planes would be part of the planned expansion of the RLAF; the Ravens would stay with the O–1s. The Laotian AC–47 program would be accelerated [redacted] The remainder of the "Blueprint" to improve the Laotian forces was endorsed, contingent upon congressional approval of the necessary funds.[41]

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The Air Force portion of the plan proceeded smoothly. On October 19, the Meo squadron was officially established; by the end of the year, the new T–28s were in place at Udorn; and in November, Water Pump began the revised pilot training program. Ironically, the introduction of Thai irregulars did what Tyrrell had failed to do in two years of trying—the creation of a joint operations center at Long Tieng. [redacted] They also wanted an American air liaison officer to ensure adequate air support for their troops. In June 1970 a JOC was officially opened at Long Tieng.[42]

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The first five C–47s slated for gunship conversion had arrived at Bangkok in July where the Thai-Am company installed the guns. The conversion was complete by September 30, and the aircraft went into action on October 7; but several teething problems immediately surfaced. The Laotian crews had been trained on the MXU–470 minigun pod used by the Air Force, while their own gunships were equipped with the older SUU–11 pod. Further, the SUU–11's wet cell battery was so heavy it took four Laotians to lift it. Almost invariably they dropped the battery, spilling electrolyte all over themselves and the aircraft. When the planes did get into the air, the crews fired out all their ammunition in one long burst. This melted the gun barrels but provided plenty of brass casings that could be sold. The upshot was that in two days every gun was jammed or otherwise unserviceable.[43]

Air Force response was swift and effective. In less than a week, replacement guns were on hand together with a technician to train the Laotian gunners. Ambassador Godley meantime suspended modifications of the three remaining C–47s. Rather than going on with the SUU–11

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40. Memo, Mark S. Pratt to Charles T. Cross, Aug 20, 1969; JCSMs 2344/157–3, Oct 16, 1969, 2344/157–4, Oct 16, 1969, 2344/157–5, Oct 16, 1969, 2344/157–6, Oct 16, 1969, 2344/157–7, Oct 16, 1969; msg, AmEmb Bangkok to SECSTATE, 031307Z Sep 69; hist, CINCPAC, 1969, III, 188–214.
41. Hist, CINCPAC, 1969, II, 210–14.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid*, 208–9; Scott intvw, Apr 6, 1973, p 32; intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Charles Loucks, Asst Air Attache, Vientiane, Jan 26, 1970.

[redacted]

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program, he suggested a one-for-one swap for USAF AC–47s that would become available when the 4th Special Operations Squadron was inactivated in December.[44] PACAF concurred in the swap and also proposed to retain three USAF gunships at Udorn to support General Vang Pao until the Laotians could take over this requirement. Three other gunships would be held in the Philippines to replace combat losses. The transfer was subsequently approved in Washington, but the Laotians were permitted to keep the five gunships fitted with SUU–11 minigun pods. The other three C–47s scheduled for modification were retained in their transport configuration.[45] These transfers were completed by January 6, 1970, bringing the Laotian gunship force to thirteen—five with SUU–11 and eight with MXU–470 minigun pods.[46]

With aircraft procurement out of the way, attention shifted to operations. Most Laotian ground commanders liked watching the fireworks of the gunships—and the crews liked selling the spent casings—but neither grasped the concept of identifying and striking targets at night. In the following months, there were frequent reports of gunship crews not flying the assigned mission or striking the wrong target. Tyrrell and his staff worked long and hard with the Laotians to lick these deficiencies. Gradually, as both air and ground personnel acquired more experience, the gunships became a potent weapon in the RLAF arsenal.[47]

Other problems stemmed from the RLAF's never having conducted night operations before. The crews had no facilities for sitting night alert, and their flight clothing could not keep out the chill of the night mountain air. The solution to these difficulties fell to the AOC commanders. In Vientiane, Maj. Jesse E. Scott, with the backing of the requirements office and the connivance of some of his Water Pump friends, was able to furnish his crews USAF flight jackets. Scott also learned that a number of cots had been stored pending construction of a military hospital. Feeling his own needs were more immediate, he and a group of his men "liberated" ample cots to take care of his crews. This last caper was a bit much even for Laos; the cots were subsequently returned; and the Laotians went back to sleeping on desk tops, in chairs, or on the floor. Nonetheless, they appreciated the American efforts.[48]

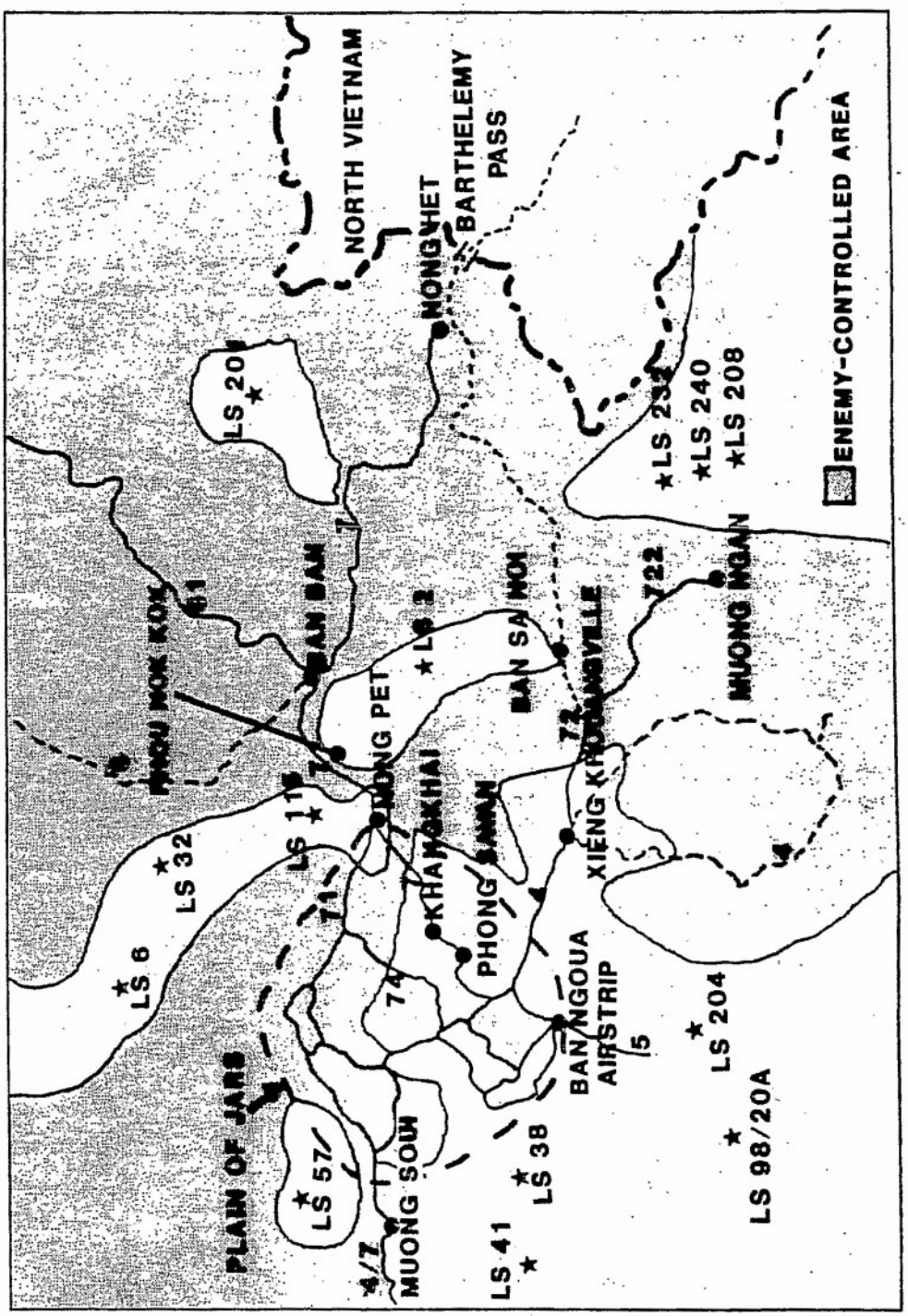
The ground part of the Blueprint plan had tougher going. The Laotian high command was willing enough to accept the increase in benefits, training, and equipment, but less enthusiastic about the proposed reorganization that would severely curtail its influence. "These things take time," General Oudone advised the ambassador.[49] Then in October 1969, a Senate foreign relations subcommittee, chaired by Senator Stuart Symington, conducted hearings into U.S. involvement.[50] As a result, the fiscal year 1971 military assistance budget for Laos was limited to $78 million. This amount could barely sustain the Laotian armed forces at their current level.[51]

While these events were taking place, About Face was grinding to a halt. The Meo came under their first serious attack on September 22, as the North Vietnamese tried to dislodge the blocking forces along Route 7. Clashes occurred more frequently during October, but there was very little change in the ground situation. Essentially, the Meo had reached the end of their tether and the communists were beginning to consolidate after their precipitous retreat. At the same time, there were recurring reports that a new division, the 312th, was on its way from North

44. Hist, CINCPAC, 1969, II, 209; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to CINCPAC, 6868, 071224Z Oct 69.
45. Msgs, CINCPACAF to CSAF, 140444Z Nov 69, CSAF to CINCPACAF, Dec 4, 1969.
46. Msg, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 061033Z Jan 70.
47. Loucks intvw, Jan 26, 1970; msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 140730Z Jun 70, subj: Lao AC–47 Sorties in Barrel Roll; Tyrrell EOTR, Sep 22, 1970, p 9.
48. Scott intvw, Apr 6, 1973, pp 33–34.
49. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 131137Z Sep 69.
50. *Laos Hearings.*
51. Hist, CINCPAC, 1969, II, 266.

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Operation About Face
Ground Situation on October 31, 1969



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Vietnam to Laos. With their supply bases on the Plain of Jars gone, the North Vietnamese began a logistic buildup in the buffer zone (their one remaining sanctuary in Laos) to support the advance of the 312th. The JCS accordingly authorized a temporary relaxation of the buffer zone rules, and Seventh Air Force launched Operation West Wind. During October 12–17, 216 USAF aircraft hit targets in the special operating area. The strikes destroyed 282 structures and about 700 tons of supplies, triggering 160 secondary explosions and 146 secondary fires.[52]

West Wind represented the high point of U.S. air operations in northern Laos. During October 1969, the Air Force flew 5,130 sorties—the highest ever in northern Laos and two-thirds of all USAF sorties flown in the country that month. In November the figure dipped to 3,075 as attention once more focused on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The embassy strongly protested this reduction, contending that "continued success of About Face is largely dependent upon [a] sustained high USAF sortie rate."[53] In reply, General Brown reiterated that covering the American withdrawal from South Vietnam claimed first priority on air resources. He would nevertheless continue "to support Vang Pao to the maximum extent feasible, consistent with Steel Tiger requirements." In any case, "air support necessary to keep Vang Pao from a decisive defeat will be provided."[54]

Perhaps even more significant was the simultaneous dismantling of the support structure that had made the About Face air campaign so successful. With more stress on Steel Tiger and fewer sorties in Barrel Roll, targeting and planning were again centralized in Saigon. The targeting and photo-interpretation sections of Seventh Air Force/ Thirteenth Air Force were cut back and eventually done away with, depriving the air attaché and the Central Intelligence Agency of a vital link to Seventh Air Force. Concurrently, the CIA reverted to its practice of keeping the Air Force in the dark regarding future plans.

Meanwhile, Junction City, Junior, had collapsed in southern Laos. On October 4, the Laotian commander at Muong Phine saw a crowd of refugees converging on the airstrip. Believing he was under assault by a vastly superior force, he ordered a hasty withdrawal. This allowed the communists to infiltrate into positions around the village. Two days later, USAF helicopters arrived with reinforcements. Not knowing the field had been abandoned, two were shot down by small-arms fire.[55] This debacle compelled the guerrillas to give up their positions around Tchepone, and at about the same time the Laotian force at Toumlane returned to Saravane. By the end of the month, the communists had recovered all the ground they held at the start of the operation.[56]

During the last two months of 1969, the ground situation in northern Laos stayed basically the same. But as the ground began to dry out, the North Vietnamese doubled their efforts to reestablish supply lines. Truck sightings in November rose from 60 to 147 and construction crews were reported at work on all major roads. Through the first week of December, 205 trucks were detected along Route 7 between North Vietnam and Ban Ban. This was the most sightings since the beginning of About Face. Route 7 west of Ban Ban was still blocked by USAF interdiction and Meo ground teams. Even so, now that trail network had dried, alternate, though less desirable, routes bypassed the interdiction point.[57]

A decrease in sorties and accelerated communist supply movements made Seventh Air Force modify its air operations. During Vang Pao's push across the plain, about fifty-five percent

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52. [redacted] *Target: Barrel Roll, March-October 1969*, p 111.
53. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 060431Z Nov 69, subj: About Face.
54. [redacted] Talking Paper, 7th AF, Reduced Strike Tactical Air Effort in Barrel Roll, Nov 26, 1969.
55. [redacted] Weekly Laos Summary, 7th AF/13th AF, Oct 4–10, 1969.
56. [redacted] Weekly Laos Summary, 7th AF/13th AF, , Oct 25–31, 1969.
57. [redacted] *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXIV, 2–10; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, pp 78–79.

[redacted]

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of all sorties were allocated to the Ravens for direct support of the ground troops. Twenty percent were devoted to road interdiction and another twenty percent to night operations. What was left hit storage areas, truck parks, and bivouacs. In mid-December, Seventh Air Force reversed priorities. Approximately forty-three of the hundred sorties a day were scheduled against hard targets. Night operations took another twenty and the remainder struck interdiction points along the road network. Close air support for the ground forces was handled by diverts from the other missions.[58]

To assist the air campaign, the Joint Chiefs further relaxed the buffer zone restrictions. During West Wind, the special operation area had been rather small and all strikes needed to be controlled by a Raven forward air controller. On December 13, however, the rules were changed to permit strikes anywhere in the buffer zone to within four miles of the border under any FAC, jet or prop.

The Air Force likewise modified its approach to road interdiction. In lieu of hammering one or two interdiction points, the aircraft hit many widely dispersed ones. The idea was to give the enemy no choice but to bring in more repair crews and to lose time by shifting heavy equipment from one area to another. This change was brought about by three factors: the dry season rendered nearly all interdiction points suitable for bypass, repair crews were near enough to the few established points that they could repair damage in a matter of hours, and the dwindling sortie rate meant there were too few planes to keep any one point closed indefinitely.

To monitor enemy traffic and to direct strike aircraft to the most active routes, the Air Force reestablished the Barrel Roll sensor fields. By the end of 1969, seven strings were active in northern Laos. Over the last months of the year, these sensors recorded over three thousand truck movements, mostly shuttle traffic between interdiction points rather than through traffic. The results of this campaign were 320 trucks destroyed or damaged, 290 road cuts, 364 structures destroyed, and 1,412 secondary explosions. This surely slowed the communist buildup somewhat, but no one was under any illusion that the expected counteroffensive could long be delayed.[59]

With the Air Force centering on interdiction targets, the RLAF handled most of the support for the ground forces. Through November and December 1969, Thai, Lao, and Meo pilots flew 4,629 sorties. This compared very favorably with the 6,984 USAF sorties during the same period, and was remarkable because the RLAF had only an average of twenty-eight planes available on any one day. Unfortunately RLAF losses were high. Since the beginning of About Face, twelve T–28s were lost and eight suffered severe battle damage, and the twenty-two aircraft delivered to Udorn by the end of the year went to replace combat losses rather than to expand the force.[60]

58. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXV, 2–6; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, pp 73–74.
59. See note above.
60. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 011055Z Jan 70, subj: T–28s for Laos.

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Chapter XV

On the Doorstep of Long Tieng (U)

(U) By the end of November 1969, About Face had reached its high-water mark, and the question of how to cope with the anticipated enemy counteroffensive arose. Originally, About Face had been conceived as a limited, three-week operation designed to reach the western edge of the Plain of Jars, but it turned out to be an offensive lasting three and a half months and extending to the plain's eastern edge. This very success contained its own cruel trap—the Meo were exhausted and overextended and the plain could not be defended. General Vang Pao, having come so far, could not give up the prize without a fight, and the prime minister, the king, and most American officials agreed. On November 30, Souvanna Phouma visited Vang Pao at Long Tieng and flew over the plain. After this tour, he expressed his and the king's desire that it be held. At the same time, he invited Prince Souphanouvong, the Pathet Lao leader, to discuss with him the plain's neutralization. He offered to halt American bombing in exchange for a North Vietnamese withdrawal. The communists rejected this overture, calling for a complete bombing halt prior to any negotiations.[1]

(U) American officials in Vientiane recognized that it was impossible to hold the whole plain. To face sixteen thousand North Vietnamese and six thousand Pathet Lao, Vang Pao could muster but fifty-five hundred men. Given this disparity and the condition of the Meo, the government could not expect to hold everything. Consequently, the embassy firmed up a plan for a phased withdrawal across the plain. Four defense "lines" (actually a series of strongpoints) would be formed to block the communist advance. The aim was to have the enemy mass in front of these strongpoints and be hit by air strikes.[2]

(U) The embassy plan had several shortcomings. In the first place, the strongpoints were not within mutually supporting distance of one another and could be easily bypassed. Too, the very idea of holding a series of static positions was completely alien to the Meo's training and experience. Finally, the plan's success rested largely on close daily coordination of the air-ground battle. Colonel Tyrrell, the air attaché, wanted to establish a joint operations center at Long Tieng where USAF and CIA officials could follow the battle on a day-to-day basis. The CIA, however, never comfortable sharing any planning responsibility with the Air Force, was adamant in its refusal. It had participated in joint planning only in extreme circumstances, and even then, planning had been confined to the overall campaign, with day-to-day operations handled by its own "case officers" and Raven forward air controllers. This approach had worked well enough when Vang Pao pushed across the plain, but would not do for a defensive operation, especially one as intricate as a phased withdrawal.[3]

(U) On the ground, the key to the whole plan was Phou Nok Kok overlooking Route 7. CIA officials described it as "the cork in the bottle." So long as it held, the North Vietnamese would be hard put to exert pressure on the remainder of the line. Once it fell, however, the communists could quickly and easily outflank the other positions and trap Vang Pao's troops on the plain.[4]

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1. (U) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 011408Z Dec 69.
2. (U) Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, p 81; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 310826Z Dec 69, subj: Coordinated Mission Report on Military Planning for Dry Season.
3. (U) Tyrrell intvw, May 12, 1975, pp 122–23.
4. (U) Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1969, p 82.

[redacted]

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Seemingly aware of this fact, the communists picked Phou Nok Kok as their first objective. On December 2, the North Vietnamese launched a four-day assault against the mountain, but gunships and tactical fighters helped the guerrillas beat off the attackers. On the 18th, the foe returned to the fray, making diversionary attacks on the town of Xieng Khouangville and Xieng Khouang airfield (Vang Pao's forward headquarters on the Plain of Jars), trying to divert attention from the main assault. The gambit failed and by the 21st, the communists once more pulled back. The enemy lost an estimated four hundred men killed and one thousand wounded in this futile attempt to "pop the cork." CIA reports attributed "a high percentage of these casualties" to the "continuous bombing and mining" by USAF aircraft.[5] Indeed, one report said a North Vietnamese unit of three hundred men suffered over two hundred casualties while attempting to cross one of the minefields.[6] The Air Force was using basically the same technique that had proved so successful during the defense of Thateng, and it appeared that as long as air power was at hand—and the guerrillas stood their ground—Phou Nok Nok could be held.

It was during the fighting for the mountain that Laotian AC–47s first appeared in Military Region II. General Vang Pao had at first opposed the idea of RLAF gunships and would not let them in his military region. His chief concern was their being used against his own troops—intentionally or inadvertently. He much preferred his air support to come from [redacted] his own Meo, or the Air Force. Nevertheless, the earlier withdrawal of USAF AC–47s obliged him to turn to the RLAF. In the ensuing months, the Laotian Spookies dispelled these fears and became one of the mainstays in defending exposed lima sites, winning effusive praise from the previously skeptical general.[7]

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Unfortunately for the allies, the new year witnessed a deterioration in the weather. Ground haze, mixed with smoke from the Meo's slash-and-burn farming, obscured most of the plain. As a rule, the haze cleared just for a short period in the afternoon and on some days not at all. On only twelve days during January was the ceiling above five thousand feet and the visibility more than five miles (the normal required for close air support). Hence, many of the scheduled sorties could not hit their targets. From January 5 to January 10, for example, 219 of 691 sorties were diverted due to bad weather and the bulk of the remainder had to use all-weather techniques on area targets.[8]

The enemy capitalized on the weather to renew the offensive. From January 2 on, the communists pounded the mountain with a nearly continuous artillery bombardment that did slight physical damage but greatly demoralized the defenders. A ground assault on January 10 captured the summit, but the guerrillas clung to several positions around the mountain's base. Two days later the Meo withdrew completely. They had not been attacked since the 10th, but without air support their situation was untenable. While the victory was an important one for the communists, they had paid dearly for it. During the six-week battle an estimated six hundred North Vietnamese were killed—a number equal to the total of Meo defenders. In contrast, the guerrillas lost only twelve men.[9]

Following the loss of Phou Nok Kok, the Meo abandoned most of their remaining positions and withdrew to the western rim of the plain. This rapid collapse utterly upset the plan for a phased withdrawal and led to some bitter recriminations among the Americans. In general, the CIA blamed a lack of air support and the unwillingness of the Meo to defend their positions. As one CIA report put it:

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5. (S) JANAF Summary, Dec 12–19, 1969.
6. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 280200Z Dec 69, subj: Request for Special Ordnance.
7. (S) Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 240730Z Jun 70, subj: RLAF Gunship Support in Barrel Roll.
8. (S) Msg, 7th AF to PACAF, 121416Z Jan 70, subj: Status and Analysis Report, BR/SL, Jan 5–10, 1970; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXVI, 2–3.
9. (S) Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, p 32.

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> It is not know what impelled Vang Pao to decide on this withdrawal at this time. Although his troops have been under heavy pressure, recently, they have defended themselves well and their casualties have not been heavy, whereas the enemy has taken heavy losses.[10]
>
> We had a large defense plan which called for a fighting withdrawal, to hit them with air, then pull out. We mistakenly thought we could teach them defensive tactics overnight. But the idea of a phased withdrawal was alien to them.[11]

The Air Force tended to fault the persistent unwillingness [redacted] to coordinate ground movements with the Air Force, as well as reluctance of the Meo to hold static positions. Maj. Gen. Robert L. Petit, Deputy Commander, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, said, "I don't see how we can help them defend a position if they don't stand up and fight."[12] However, Colonel Tyrrell pointed out that "the government forces wisely chose to withdraw and lose terrain in favor of the more precious commodity of fighting troops."[13] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

The entire plan had hinged on a willingness of the Meo to hold a series of static positions, close cooperation of air and ground forces, and the availability of air power. Unfortunately the first two conditions never did exist, and the weather effectively precluded the third. (During February, there were only thirteen days of favorable weather.)

The Air Force could do very little about the first two problems, but did take steps to overcome the weather. On January 21, it introduced a program called Box Score targeting. In essence, this was an all-weather version of Snare Drum, using loran or radar in place of visual bombing. The [redacted] selected the targets based on the best available intelligence, but, as with Snare Drum, the results were mixed. The weather prevented aerial observation of results, and ground teams could rarely penetrate the target area to provide a firsthand assessment. The paucity of results and the failure of the strikes to slow the enemy did nothing to change the Air Force's low opinion [redacted] targeting.[14] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

To improve visual reconnaissance and to give some relief to the overworked Ravens, the Air Force sent a detachment of three OV–10s from Nakhon Phanom to Udorn. These planes averaged two missions a day over the Plain of Jars. On February 17, the Air Force assigned three AC–119Ks to Udorn to replace the AC–47s turned over to the RLAF. The AC–119Ks added considerable punch to night interdiction and to the defense of lima sites.[15] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

Much more important, however, was the introduction of B–52s into Laos during February 1970. Ambassador Godley had first called for the big bombers in July 1969, but the proposal had not been favorably received. On January 23, 1970, with the rapidly deteriorating situation in Barrel Roll, the ambassador renewed his request. The Joint Chiefs now reversed their earlier position and supported the ambassador, although a firm decision was put off until it could be considered "at the highest level." In the meantime, SAC was ordered to conduct photo reconnaissance and accomplish the necessary planning in anticipation of presidential approval.[16]

While the high-level discussions were going on, Godley sent another appeal, this time directly to Secretary of Defense Laird, stressing the urgency of the matter and furnishing detailed

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10. Msg, CAS FOV, 20, 131, 120734Z Jan 70.
11. Intvw, Kenneth Sams and Lt Col John Schlight, Proj CHECO hists, with a senior CIA official, Mar 14, 1970.
12. Briefing, Maj Gen Robert L. Petit, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Feb 21, 1970.
13. JANAF Summary, Feb 20–27, 1970.
14. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, pp 43–45.
15. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXVII. The AC–119K featured two 20-mm cannon and four 7.62-mm miniguns, a computerized fire-control system, a night observation sight, infrared and side-looking radar, a 1.5 million-candlepower illuminator, a 20-kilowatt pencil beam, and twenty-four flares dispensed from a launcher.
16. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 231214Z Jan 70, subj: Arclight Strike in PDJ Area, JCS to CINCPAC, 241559Z Jan 70, subj: Arclight Strike in Northern Laos.

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recommendations for six targets. Included in the message was a formal request for B–52 strikes from Souvanna Phouma.[17] Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., USA, MACV commander, dispatched an Arc Light targeting team to Udorn on February 14 to assess the ambassador's targets. The MACV planners were not impressed with Godley's nominations, since the "materiél value" of the targets fell far below that normally used for selecting targets in southern Laos. MACV further noted that, except for shock effect and all-weather delivery, tacair would be better than B–52s for striking targets in the Plain of Jars. Nevertheless, MACV recommended a strike of thirty-six B–52s on the most lucrative target—the suspected headquarters and staging area of the North Vietnamese 312th Division. The principal rationale for this strike was the psychological effect it would have on both friendly and enemy forces.[18]

In granting its approval on February 17, the JCS cautioned this was for a onetime strike only. Future requests would have to be reviewed singly, based on the ambassador's recommendations, MACV's validation, JCS concurrence, and approval by the Secretary of Defense. The Joint Chiefs also warned that favorable consideration of future targets needed "more substantive military basis" than the current request.[19]

The B–52s took off from U-Tapao Air Base, Thailand, on the night of February 17/18. Aircrews reported 130 secondary explosions ten times more powerful than the bomb explosions. The next day, [redacted] ground team entered the area and reported all bombs on target with numerous bunkers destroyed. Finding just twenty dead, the team assumed that "many others" had been buried in the bunkers or "fragmented" by the bombs. Despite the low number of enemy killed, ten more targets were hit between February and May; but B–52 operations in northern Laos were then suspended due to the incursion into Cambodia by American and South Vietnamese troops.[20] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

As the North Vietnamese moved across the plain, the Seventh Air Force upped the sorties from an average of 100 to 180 a day. A one-day peak of 224 sorties was reached on February 18. Most of them were assigned to the Raven forward air controllers, but the pall of haze and smoke hanging over the plain permitted very few visual strikes. Thus, the majority of aircraft were diverted to other areas or dropped their bombs on rather dubious "area targets." The RLAF likewise went from 90 to 140 sorties a day with no better success than the Air Force. General Brown asserted: "We are still not as effective in putting ordnance on target in conditions of weather as we should be. We ask them [redacted] to give us firm targets which they can't always do, and they can't control all the sorties they get."[21] The results of the increased air strikes, the Seventh Air Force commander said, were nowhere commensurate with the effort, and they did not significantly slow the communist drive. On February 20, the Meo abandoned the last friendly position on the plain. A week later the North Vietnamese reoccupied Muong Soui without firing a shot—the neutralists once again executing their favorite defensive maneuver.[22] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

When Muong Soui fell, the lines were about where they had been the previous June. The main difference was that the attack of the communists on Long Tieng had been postponed eight months, their supply caches on the Plain of Jars had been destroyed, and they had suffered serious losses, variously estimated at between 3,500 and 6,000 men. In comparison, friendly casualties had been fairly light, 614 killed (520 Meo, 84 FAR, and 10 neutralists) and 1,436

17. Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 160059Z Feb 70.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 170122Z Feb 70, subj: Arclight Strike in Barrel Roll.
20. Hist, SAC, FY 72, III, 419.
21. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXVII, 2–5; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, p 15; intvw, Kenneth Sams and Lt Col Richard F. Kott, Proj CHECO hists, with Gen George S. Brown, Comdr, 7th AF, Mar 30, 1970.
22. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, p 35.

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wounded (1,130 Meo, 230 FAR, and 76 neutralists). Moreover, both sides were nearing the point of mutual exhaustion. General Vang Pao's troops were sapped from the long campaign and his losses could not be replaced. In the words of one longtime observer, "Forty percent of the Meo are over thirty-five years old, the other sixty percent are under fifteen—those in between are dead!"[23] The North Vietnamese had made up their personnel losses, but the supply caches on the plain were empty and everything had to be trucked all the way from Ban Ban. Though the haze layer afforded a measure of protection, any clearing of the weather would render this long logistics "tail" vulnerable to air strikes.[24]

Following the loss of Muong Soui, there was a two-week break in the fighting as the communists ferried supplies across the plain in preparation for the assault on Long Tieng. General Vang Pao regrouped his forces to meet the attack. He deployed some fifteen hundred men in a line of hilltop sites (the Vang Pao line) between Long Tieng and the Plain of Jars. The remainder, about a thousand men, were divided between Long Tieng itself and Sam Thong in the adjoining valley. The North Vietnamese had fifteen thousand men available, with nearly one-third of them facing Vang Pao.

The Seventh Air Force used the lull to shave its sorties and to redirect its effort to the lines of communication. Sorties averaged ninety-seven a day during the first week of March, but dropped to eighty-eight over the second week. There being no significant ground action, the bulk of these sorties struck Box Score targets or seeded mines on the routes leading into the plain.[25]

Of course, the intense air activity of the past nine months had not gone unnoticed in the press. By 1970 there was a large and enterprising press corps in Saigon, adept at ferreting out a good story. In spite of the official policy of "no comment" on operations in northern Laos, the intrinsic details of About Face had appeared regularly in *The New York Times* and other papers. Press interest was heightened when the hearings of Senator Symington's foreign relations subcommittee brought the full scope of American activities into the open. In the view of American officials in Saigon, the "no comment" policy had lost its utility: "The rule cannot be carried out in a meaningful manner and it only serves to lessen our credibility with the press, Congress, and American people and results very often in exaggerated or inaccurate treatment of our air operations by the media."[26] What Saigon wanted was a series of low-key background briefings to the press, either in Saigon or Washington, so news reports could be kept in proper perspective.[27]

Whether as a result of this prodding or for other reasons, President Nixon finally took the cover off U.S. operations on March 6 with a statement from the Key Biscayne White House. The statement traced North Vietnamese aggression since 1964 and acknowledged American efforts to counter it. According to the President, America's objectives were to ensure the neutrality of Laos, to protect the borders of Thailand, and to guarantee the safe withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam. He went on to say:

- The United States had no ground forces in Laos.
- No American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in ground combat operations.[28]
- The U.S. flies reconnaissance and combat support missions for Laotian forces when

23. Edgar "Pop" Buell, quoted in *New York Times*, Oct 17, 1969, p 23.
24. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, pp 35–37.
25. *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXVIII, 2–3; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, pp 36–38.
26. Msg, AmEmb Saigon to SECSTATE, 230345Z Feb 70, subj: Publicity on US Air Operations in Laos.
27. *Ibid.*
28. This portion of the statement is in error. Seven Americans had lost their lives at Lima Site 85 and numerous AID officials had fallen victim to communist terrorism. The rest of the statement is correct in a narrow legalistic sense.

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> requested by the Royal Laotian Government. Interdiction of enemy materiél occurs over areas held or contested by communist forces, and such flights occur only when requested by the RLG. The level of air response and U.S. aid has increased only as the number of NVA troops in Laos and their level of aggression has increased.[29]

Although the Key Biscayne statement clarified American policy, it failed to lift the mantle of secrecy from the details of U.S. operations and did not assuage a skeptical Congress that was to impose increasingly stringent limits on American activities in Laos.

Back in Laos, the fighting flared on March 12, when the North Vietnamese hit the Vang Pao line. While weather curbed USAF sorties, the communists swiftly isolated and bypassed the Meo outposts to strike squarely at Long Tieng. It was soon apparent their objective was to destroy Vang Pao's forces rather than to occupy territory. By the 17th, the enemy had reached Skyline Ridge overlooking Long Tieng and was poised for the final thrust. Visibility in the Long Tieng area stayed at a mile or less, making air operations almost impossible. Nevertheless, twenty USAF aircraft flew through the haze to hit enemy positions. In Colonel Tyrrell's view, the greatest danger at this point was from midair collisions. Incredibly, two Meo pilots at Long Tieng completed thirty-one missions, taking off and dropping their bombs without straying from the traffic pattern.

With the North Vietnamese knocking on the door of Long Tieng, plans for a last-ditch stand were hastily drawn up. General Vang Pao deployed his remaining troops in a defensive perimeter around Long Tieng/Sam Thong and called back the guerrillas still holding portions of the Vang Pao line. The Thai government agreed to send a seven-hundred-man regimental combat team and three howitzers. The Laotian general staff in Vientiane ordered reinforcements sent from Military Regions III and IV, provoking objections from the two southern commanders, Maj. Gens. Phasouk Somly and Bounpone Makthepharak. Prince Boun Oum, political leader of the southern faction, in a rare display of statesmanship, told his generals in no uncertain terms to start acting like Laotian nationalists instead of warlords. For its part, Seventh Air Force jumped the number of sorties to two hundred a day, but warning that the weather would hamper their effectiveness, and added a fourth AC–119 to the Udorn detachment. These gunships teamed with the Laotian AC–47s to afford all-night coverage of Long Tieng. To replace the AC–119s in their interdiction role, Seventh assigned three more AC–130s to the nightly schedule.[30]

On March 18, the communists mounted their attack. The main blow fell on Sam Thong, and it was abandoned by midafternoon. The loss of Sam Thong broke Vang Pao's perimeter and left no defenses between there and Long Tieng. During the day the Air Force flew 163 sorties, but just 29 could penetrate the haze around Long Tieng. The rest used loran and radar to strike suspected enemy troop concentrations. That evening the first [redacted] contingent began to arrive, but with two communist battalions approaching from Sam Thong and two others pressing from the east, things looked bleak. Then, inexplicably, the communists halted for the night, giving Vang Pao time to patch together a new perimeter.

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CIA

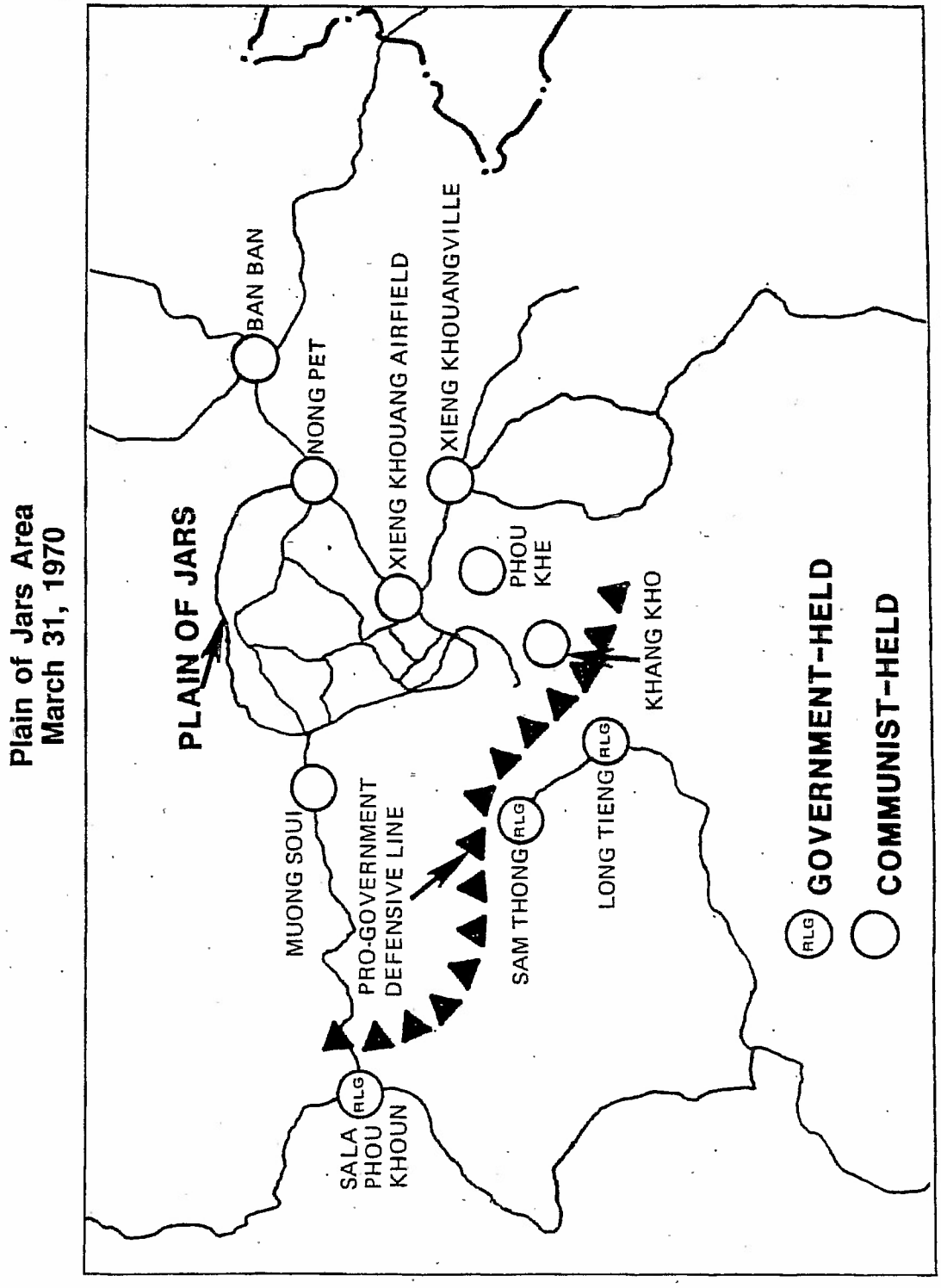
The next two days, weather hindered air operations as the enemy pushed ahead. By March 20, the communists were within a mile of Long Tieng and had artillery emplaced only two miles away. However, the Thai were in place and Laotian reinforcements were coming in. Guerrillas from outlying positions were likewise drifting back into the valley. Vang Pao had two thousand men inside his perimeter, but the North Vietnamese with six battalions (thirty-six

29. President Richard M. Nixon, "The Situation in Laos: the Case for Escalation," in *Conflict in Laos*, eds: Marvin E. Gettleman, *et al* (New York, 1970), p 261.

30. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, pp 19–22; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 171027Z Mar 70, subj: Enemy and Friendly Intentions and Capabilities Following the Fall of Tha Tam Bleung (Site 72); Summary of Air Operations Southeast Asia, LXVIII, 2–4.

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hundred men) still outnumbered the defenders. On the other hand, Vang Pao was building up his forces faster than the enemy, who seemed to be having some problems getting supplies to forward units.

There were no USAF sorties on March 21 due to a major search and rescue operation in Steel Tiger, but five Meo T–28s flew fifty sorties. Water Pump pilots also entered the fray by flying twelve strike sorties (these being officially listed as RLAF ones). A probe by Vang Pao's troops of enemy positions on Skyline Ridge was beaten back, but it was the first action initiated by the defenders and the first indication the tide had begun to turn.[31]

On March 22, a sudden burst of rain halted ground action, but the Air Force went on pummeling all-weather targets. The rain washed away much of the haze, and the 23d dawned bright and clear. For the next four days, air operations were intense and potent. An average of 185 sorties a day managed to hit their targets visually. Of these, 50 to 60 worked over the communists in front of Long Tieng while the others played havoc with exposed logistic lines. Air Force pilots sighted 259 enemy trucks, attacked 226 and destroyed or damaged 148. The RLAF had 65 sorties, all against targets in the Long Tieng area. These strikes held the enemy at bay while Vang Pao continued to receive reinforcements. By March 26, he had thirty-four hundred men, about equal to the communist strength. The next day, behind an intense aerial bombardment, these troops recaptured several points along Skyline Ridge. Another force moved on Sam Thong, which was retaken on March 30. The North Vietnamese were still in the area, but the initiative had clearly passed to the friendly forces—the siege of Long Tieng was over.

In commenting on the successful defense of Long Tieng, Ambassador Godley lavishly praised the Air Force. He wrote General Brown on April 1, "Certainly the fact that Long Tieng is still in friendly hands is due to your air support."[32] In return, the Seventh Air Force commander credited the ground forces for standing their ground and forcing the enemy to focus on a fairly narrow front. There, despite the handicap of weather, the cumulative effect of the bombing devastated the communists' frontline units and reduced incoming supplies to a trickle.[33]

During the following weeks, General Vang Pao pressed cautiously outward. The communists gave ground grudgingly and as a parting shot made a major assault on Lima Site 32. The attack, however, was smothered under one hundred sorties a day. By June, government forces had reoccupied the Vang Pao line, except for Ban Na (Lima Site 15), when rain ended the campaign.[34]

In southern Laos, meanwhile, the ground situation had remained fairly stable since the fall of Thateng in April 1969. The North Vietnamese continued to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the government did not seriously try to interfere save for the short-lived Operation Junction City, Junior. Elsewhere, the sporadic and at times bitter clashes between government and Pathet Lao troops did little to change the status quo. Then on March 18, 1970, the situation took a dramatic turn when a coup d'etat toppled the government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia. The new government under Lt. Gen. Lon Nol at once canceled the transit rights the North Vietnamese had enjoyed under Prince Sihanouk. This obliged the North Vietnamese to depend almost totally on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to move supplies into South Vietnam. To counteract the loss of Cambodia, the North Vietnamese elected to reorganize and expand their supply routes in Laos. First, however, they needed to dispose of the government garrison still on the Bolovens Plateau.[35]

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31. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, pp 19–22; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXVII.
32. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane (Amb G. McMurtrie Godley) to 7th AF (Gen George S. Brown), 011105Z Apr 70.
33. Brown intvw, Mar 30, 1970.
34. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, pp 19–22; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXVIII, 2–3 thru 2–4, LXIX, 2–2.
35. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Apr 15 and May 18, 1970.

The blow fell on April 28 when the North Vietnamese assaulted the four hundred-man garrison at Attopeu. After an initial shelling, the enemy gave the defenders a chance to withdraw if they laid down their arms. The Laotian commander accepted these terms and evacuated the town the next day. Other garrisons were hastily abandoned, and on June 9 the government lowered its flag over Saravane.[36]

The one bright spot of this dismal period was the RLAF squadron's performance at Pakse. In May, its ten T–28s averaged twenty-eight sorties a day, stiffening the sagging morale of the ground troops and covering their withdrawal. On the day Saravane fell, a Raven forward air controller dropped leaflets on the town, announcing it would be retaken "mainly by RLAF bombing" and urging the residents to "get away from the enemy."[37] Shortly afterward, pinpoint bombing by T–28s demolished three buildings housing the North Vietnamese command post. Later intelligence reports revealed a North Vietnamese general had been killed in this strike.[38]

On June 12, two T–28s and an AC–47 from Vientiane augmented the Pakse squadron. This shifting of resources from one military region to another, though small in number, was an important first for the RLAF and marked the emergence of the combined operations center as a factor in military operations. (Until then, it had been confined to controlling transport aircraft.) As part of Ambassador Godley's Blueprint for Improving RLG Military Forces, the center expanded to an integrated command post that controlled all Laotian forces not actually committed to combat. On May 26, the combat operations center had moved into a new building, from which it could communicate directly with the regional joint operations centers. The Pakse action was its first shifting of resources to meet a specific threat. In the ensuing campaigns, this ability markedly improved the performance of Laotian military forces.[39]

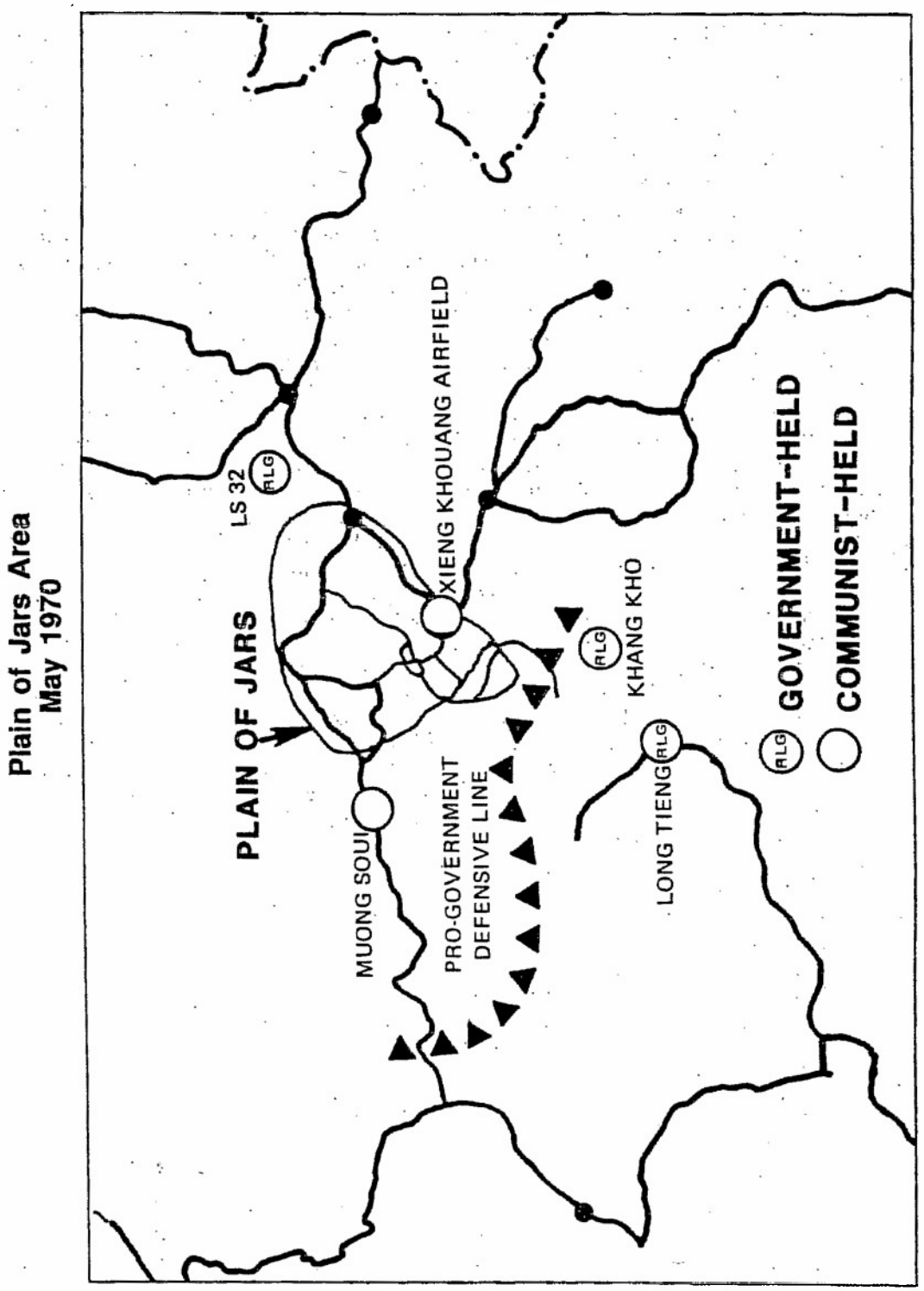
By the time the dry season ended in June 1970, the war in northern Laos had come to its final phase. Over the previous two years, the "quiet war" had given way to large-scale conventional operations as the North Vietnamese poured in more and more regular troops. The fighting climaxed during About Face—"the first major victory in the history of the Royal Laotian Government."[40] Even so, the resilience and determination of the North Vietnamese was depicted in their rapid recovery and subsequent drives on Long Tieng and the Bolovens Plateau. The Meo had done most of the fighting and had gradually changed from guerrillas to a conventional force. They faced exhaustion, if not outright extinction, for only during the end of the period did the regular Laotian army join the battle. It was clear that, in the future, the FAR would have to shoulder more of the burden if the government was to stay in the war. Ambassador Godley's Blueprint plan marked the first tentative steps in this direction. However, budget restrictions and the inherent limits of a feudal society slowed progress. Meantime, Laos had to place greater reliance on [redacted] continued support from the U.S. Air Force.[41] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S) OIA

In addition, the upturn in fighting between 1968 and 1970, coupled with the close of Rolling Thunder, induced a change in USAF operations. One aspect of this change was Colonel Tyrrell's program to build the RLAF that resulted in a new peak of performance and operational efficiency. From fifty-five hundred sorties in 1968, the figure climbed to ten thousand in 1969 and to twenty thousand in 1970. This rise is all the more remarkable since the Laotians had at most sixty T–28s, and very often less than half of them were ready for combat. In the process, however, the ideal of self-sufficiency had been sacrificed to operational necessity, and the RLAF depended more than ever on American aid. To come up with the needed sorties, the Americans

36. JANAF Summary, Jun 20, 1970.
37. Khouang intvw, Jun 12, 1970.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Intvw, Maj John C. Pratt, Proj CHECO hist, with Col Robert L. F. Tyrrell, AIRA Vientiane, Jun 13, 1970.
40. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Oct 29, 1969.
41. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 290614Z May 70, subj: Assessment of U.S. Policy in Laos.

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found themselves doing more and training less. Training output barely matched attrition, and seasoned pilots could not be spared from combat to serve as instructors or staff officers—"They fly until they die." In consequence the RLAF remained nearly completely devoid of any middle management. The drive to generate sorties also meant deferral of required repairs and aircraft modification. Aid dollars went for such expendables as fuel and ammunition and not for capital investment in the support facilities demanded to sustain the high sortie rate. The cumulative result was a near collapse of the RLAF in 1971.

Between 1968 and 1970, USAF combat sorties peaked at over two hundred a day. At the height of the campaign (October 1969), Barrel Roll accounted for about two-thirds of all USAF sorties in Laos. A host of new programs accompanied this upswing, most developed for use in Steel Tiger, South Vietnam, or Rolling Thunder. The bombing halt over North Vietnam, the diminished activity in South Vietnam, and increased use of electronic sensors and gunships in Steel Tiger made introduction of these programs into northern Laos possible. During this period, the complex command and control arrangements were smoothed over and a brief interval of cooperation, culminating in About Face, emerged. Unfortunately, this fragile structure began to collapse under the stress of the renewed communist offensive.

New budget restrictions and congressional opposition to the war whittled overall USAF sorties in Southeast Asia to ten thousand a month. Air Force units gradually withdrew from the theater and the remaining sorties were concentrated in Steel Tiger. The sortie allocation varied from month to month but as a rule a 70/10/10/10 ratio prevailed (70 percent to Steel Tiger and 10 percent each to Barrel Roll, South Vietnam, and Cambodia).

Diplomatic and political moves in Laos and Washington heavily influenced operations in the final years of the war. Consequently, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a newly created special action group of the National Security Council took a more direct hand in running combat operations, breeding a whole new set of problems to be resolved.

The summer of 1970 also saw the beginning of major USAF withdrawals from Thailand. The 11th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron at Udorn was inactivated, the A–1s at Nakhon Phanom fell from seventy-five to twenty-five, and the sixty F–105s at Takhli returned to the United States. College Eye EC–121 air control and warning aircraft were likewise discontinued, and in November the AC–119s moved from Udorn to Nakhon Phanom. The size of Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force decreased from 176 to 88 people, mostly in the support and administrative areas. These reductions eliminated the tactical air control center, a loss that badly hurt Seventh/Thirteenth's ability to plan and monitor Barrel Roll operations.[42]

Of greater import than unit withdrawals was a congressionally imposed ceiling of ten thousand fighter sorties per month for all of Southeast Asia.[43] Most of the sorties were brought to bear on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, with but thirty a day (9 percent) planned for Barrel Roll. This distribution mirrored the relative priorities of the various theaters, the level of enemy action, and the amount of force needed to meet the different objectives. Since the embassy adopted a holding strategy for the wet season, the minimum number of USAF sorties was called for. If enemy action accelerated, Seventh Air Force stood ready to shift sufficient air power to the north to counter the threat but not to support offensive operations.[44]

Inherent in sortie allocation was Seventh Air Force's assumption (based on embassy projections) that the RLAF could furnish three thousand sorties a month. The RLAF had close air support, while the Americans provided "heavy sorties" for special situations and tactical emergencies. (The American aircraft carried a heavier load of bombs and more sophisticated

42. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1970, pp 5–6.
43. Sorties not used in any one month could be added to the next month's allocation. Thus, Seventh Air Force was encouraged to "bank" sorties during slack periods in order to "surge" during a crisis.
44. 7th AF Oplan 715–71, Northeast Monsoon Plan, Sep 14, 1970, pp 1–2.

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warranted a strike, and, if so, which aircraft (A–1s, AC–119s, or F–4s) should carry it out. The Army, however, wanted to receive proper credit for any trucks destroyed and did not want its information "mixed" with other sources.

Deprived of a formal program, the Army and Air Force crews went on working together on an ad hoc basis through the rainy season. Coordination was completely dependent on direct contact between the crews. After the gunships moved to Nakhon Phanom in November 1970, that coordination was lost and the program gradually died. Later attempts to resurrect the hunter-killer idea came to naught.[48]

The introduction in May 1970 of an F–4 quick reaction force at Udorn, basically a revival of the old Bango/Whiplash program of 1965, was more successful. Each day twelve F–4s went on alert at Udorn for tactical emergencies or lucrative targets discovered by forward air controllers. Previously, this need had been met by diverting aircraft from other missions; but with the whittling down of sorties, fewer planes were available for diverts. The method for launching the quick reaction force matched that for diverts. Information on a found target was passed to the ABCCC for relay to Seventh Air Force. If Seventh deemed the strike justified, it fixed the number of aircraft and directed them to take off. The ABCCC then coordinated between the flight and the requester (FAC or ground unit). It usually took twenty minutes to mount a quick reaction strike and another twenty to get to the target, so most Barrel Roll Targets could be hit in an hour. Since the short reaction time precluded arming the aircraft to suit each target, six five-hundred-pound bombs was the standard load. In addition, various aircraft in the flight carried high-drag bombs, cluster bomb units, or napalm.[49]

The quick reaction force was never popular, even though it furnished a more reliable response than looking around for aircraft to divert. The crews disliked the long hours of boredom, and it tied up twelve planes all day, whether or not they ever took off. This complicated scheduling aircraft to ensure flying time was equally parceled out and that there were enough planes to meet other mission needs. Then, too, the twelve aircraft on alert were counted against the thirty to Barrel Roll. Hence, just eighteen were normally available to attack fixed targets. The CIA in particular preferred to have as many aircraft as possible overhead, and to hear the comforting thud of bombs even if there were no suitable targets. (The CIA believed that there were always suitable targets.) However, Seventh Air Force could no longer afford the luxury of simply scheduling aircraft and then flying them to meet the schedule. Every sortie had to count and was not flown unless it could be justified in terms of concrete results.[50]

Along with the quick reaction force, Seventh insisted on more precise targeting in Barrel Roll. Fixed targets needed to be confirmed by at least two different intelligence sources (usually photo or electronic reconnaissance in addition to FAC or ground reports). Target nominations also had to include an analysis of the anticipated results, which elicited charges from the CIA that the Air Force was "hunting BDA" [bomb damage assessment] in lieu of considering the effect on the ground war. Nonetheless, with a static ground situation, the Air Force knew of no better way to measure success than by bomb damage assessment. They likewise felt the CIA often exaggerated results to justify more sorties, because poststrike photography rarely confirmed that agency's reports. The CIA rejoined that you could not count dead bodies from a photograph, and as long as the ground forces held their position the sortie should be counted a success.[51]

To assist in making every sortie count, Combat Skyspot was reintroduced into Barrel Roll. From the fall of Lima Site 85 in 1968, radar coverage of northern Laos had been limited

48. Richard R. Sexton and William M. Hodgson, *OV–1/AC–119 Hunter-Killer Team* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1972).
49. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1970, p 21.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Aug 31 and Oct 19, 1970.

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to the southernmost edge of Barrel Roll. To extend this coverage, an improved radar (TSQ-96) was installed at Udorn in September 1970. The new set covered the whole Plain of Jars, including interdiction points on Route 7, and its accuracy surpassed both loran D and radar offset bombing.[52]

A problem of both Combat Skyspot and loran D was the inaccuracy of available maps. In the summer of 1970, RF–4s out of Udorn began photomapping the principal roads and large areas along the western Plain of Jars. The aircraft's computer recorded the loran coordinates at the point directly beneath the aircraft at the instant the photo was taken. Using this data, a photomap was made with a grid overlay that provided exact coordinates of every position on the map. These maps were distributed to the forward air controllers and major ground units. A chief advantage of the system (dubbed "lt gap" for loran targeting, grid annotated photography) was that the pilot did not need a map. Once the target coordinates were determined, they could be passed either to the Skyspot site at Udorn or straight to loran-equipped F–4s. In the case of Combat Skyspot, the radar controller vectored the aircraft to the proper release point. For F–4s fitted with loran, the target coordinates were set into the plane's bombing computer, which provided the same function. A series of tests held during November 1970 of one hundred drops on five targets produced an accuracy of ninety-eight yards from ninety-eight impacts, with two gross errors discounted.[53]

The Air Force also brought two new types of ordnance into Barrel Roll during the 1970 wet season—the Snake Eye high-drag bomb and the CBU–38. The Snake Eye weapon, designed to increase the accuracy of high-speed jets, had flaps attached to a five-hundred-pound bomb. The flaps deployed when the bomb was released, slowing it and reducing the forward throw distance. In practice, the bomb proved to be accurate to within three hundred feet, about twice as accurate as slicks (low-drag bombs).

The CBU–38, a cluster bomb new to the theater, was a canister containing forty 14-pound bomblets. Each bomblet yielded bigger fragments, greater fragment velocity, and more incendiary effect than earlier cluster bombs. Unlike earlier CBUs, the canister holding the bomblets, which cost fourteen hundred dollars, remained attached to the aircraft. All bomblets could be ejected in two seconds, but the pilot could control the number of bomblets dropped by the length of time he held his thumb on the firing button. Most pilots preferred a one-second burst to allow a second run on the target. In one second, three canisters (the F–4's normal load) dispersed sixty bomblets in a one-hundred-foot by three-hundred-foot area.[54]

With Snake Eye and the CBU–38, the Air Force had begun to employ every weapon of its Southeast Asia arsenal in Barrel Roll—though in smaller numbers than elsewhere; but the foremost question was how to best use these weapons. Because no major wet-season offensive was in the offing, the Air Force believed the bulk of its effort should center on the enemy logistic network. During the preceding dry season, with Route 7 closed, the communists had been unable to restock their supply bases on the Plain of Jars. With this in mind, two interdiction points were selected on Route 7. While the RLAF and the quick reaction force were left to support Vang Pao, the rest of the sorties focused on the interdiction points in an attempt to again close Route 7. Between April and June, 844 sorties hammered these two road segments. The mixture of bombs and rain did the job. A roadwatch team reported that the route was closed for twenty-six days in April, twenty-nine days during May, and continuously from May 23 through the close of the rainy season.[55]

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52. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1970, p 42.
53. *Ibid*, pp 26–27.
54. *Ibid*, pp 27–28.
55. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 270111Z Nov 70, subj: Laos Sitrep, Northern Laos.

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The communists countered with a renewed road-building program. Prior to 1966, there were very few motorable roads in eastern Barrel Roll and none could carry traffic in the rainy season. This had largely determined the ebb-and-flow pattern of fighting over those early years. From 1966 to 1968, the North Vietnamese emphasized road improvement, upsetting the seesaw pattern during the 1968 dry season. However, Route 7 between Ban Ban and the Plain of Jars remained a bottleneck. For two years, the Air Force had succeeded in closing this road for a good part of the wet season, allowing Vang Pao to conduct his successful About Face campaign. The new road building effort aimed to settle this problem once and for all. In lieu of merely repairing existing roads, the North Vietnamese constructed a series of alternate routes that in general followed the trails previously used to bypass the bottleneck on Route 7. They also built two entirely new roads (Routes 72 and 73), affording direct access from North Vietnam to the southern Plain of Jars. These roads proved particularly nettlesome to the Air Force, since there were few points of the terrain that could not be easily bypassed. The North Vietnamese additionally brought in an array of antiaircraft weapons to stave off interdiction. While the roads were not completed in time to have much effect on the 1970-71 campaigns, they boded ill for the future.[56]

As the Air Force pummeled Route 7, General Vang Pao laid plans for a limited wet-season offensive. His objectives were similar to those originally envisioned for About Face—a feint toward Muong Soui accompanied by a drive to the edge of the Plain of Jars. The specific goals were to retake Lima Site 15 and occupy Phou Seu overlooking the plain. Vang Pao's chief striking force would be Meo, but once the positions were secure he planned to move in [redacted] battalions to hold them. The Meo would then revert to their traditional roles as scouts and guerrillas to raid onto the plain and to act as a mobile reserve at Long Tieng.[57] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S) CIA

The operation got off to a shaky start on August 18 and ground to a halt with no appreciable gain by the end of the month. A combination of factors accounted for the failure: poor weather that held air support to thirty-six U.S. and eighty-two Laotian sorties, low troop morale, and stubborn communist resistance. In September the two sides sparred inconclusively as Vang Pao steadily built up his forces. With Route 7 closed, the Air Force shifted some sorties to the ground campaign. During September, 253 of 843 sorties performed close air support, 204 of them quick reaction strikes from Udorn. The RLAF had 1,057 sorties, 848 in support of Vang Pao and the remainder distributed among the military regions. In October, 321 of 661 USAF sorties assisted the ground troops and in November the figure rose to 439 out of 763. The RLAF sorties peaked at 2,400 during October but fell to 1,500 in November as the wear and tear took its toll.[58]

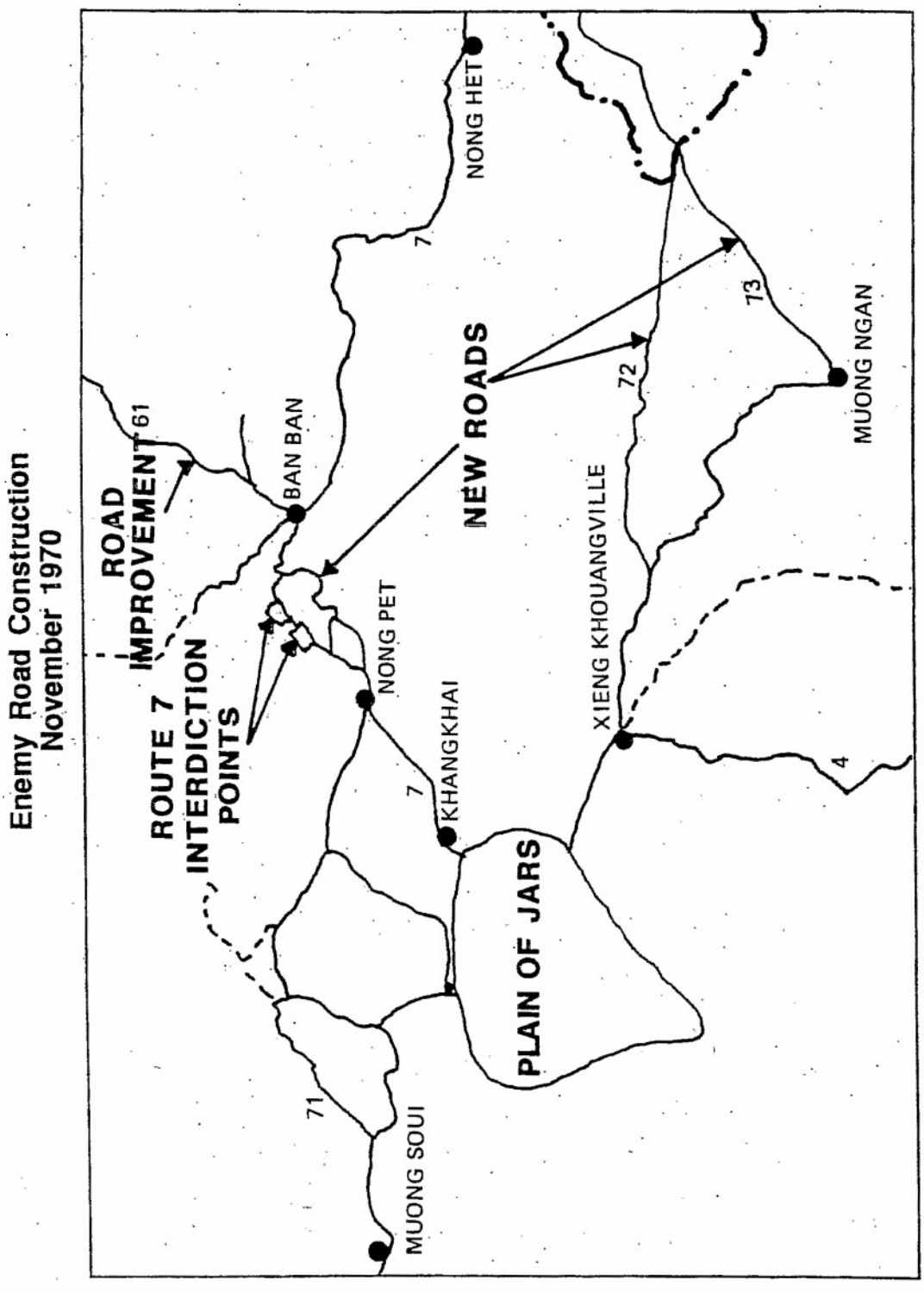
In October, as the North Vietnamese pulled back from their forward positions, Vang Pao's offensive finally gathered momentum. Muong Soui was taken on October 11, Lima Site 15 two weeks later, and Phou Seu by the last of the month. Meantime, the North Vietnamese formed a new defense line along Route 4 across the middle of the plain.

The enemy's unexpected withdrawal was due to several reasons. In the first place, USAF interdiction prevented full restocking of North Vietnamese supply depots on the Plain of Jars. Deprived of an adequate forward supply base, the communists could not sustain major operations west of the plain. Coupled to this was the cumulative pressure of Vang Pao's offensive that made the enemy consume the supplies on hand. Prisoner reports disclosed that one unit ran out of ammunition during the fight for Muong Soui, and there was a general dearth of supplies throughout the front. So, after repulsing the initial thrust, the communists of necessity pulled

56. *Ibid.*
57. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 060605Z Sep 70.
58. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 241050Z Nov 70, subj: Air Support of RLGAF; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXXIV–LXXVI, Sec 2.

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back and shortened their supply lines. However, the enemy may also have withdrawn early rather than risk being caught as in About Face the previous year.[59]

Even though Vang Pao now had some maneuvering room, things were still "tense." The communists were just twenty miles from Long Tieng and by the end of November had restored their logistic network to the Plain of Jars. Vang Pao, backed by the king and the prime minister, wanted to move onto the plain. Ambassador Godley, noting that "the rains in Laos are dwindling almost as fast as USAF sorties," judged the move unrealistic. He did go along with a large-scale raid on Ban Ban to pinch off the main supply corridor and possibly lure the communists from the plain.[60]

The operation, named Counterpunch III, got under way on November 26 but execution was fitful from the start. Low clouds and haze restricted air support and the ground troops did not move out aggressively. The operation was eventually called off on January 5, 1971, with minimal results. Only in the last week of December were friendly forces able to cross the Ban Ban valley. Even then, Route 7 was closed for just a few days, and the communists did not withdraw many men from the Plain of Jars.[61]

The principal outcome of Counterpunch III was the revival of the issue of joint planning. Typically, [redacted] planned ground operations without telling either the air attaché or Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. After getting the ambassador's approval, the plan was sent through CIA channels to Washington. There, a CIA official briefed the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (none other than William H. Sullivan, former Ambassador to Laos). The State Department next passed its approval to Vientiane, again through CIA channels, without coordinating with the Defense Department. Only then was Seventh Air Force informed of the air support needs. Since this did not give Seventh enough time to integrate the [redacted] request with its other requirements, only a reduced number of sorties were available. This prompted [redacted] charges that the operation failed due to a dearth of air support.

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Gen. John D. Ryan, the new Air Force Chief of Staff, raised this issue with the other Joint Chiefs on December 17. What Ryan wanted was assurance that representatives of the CIA, the air attaché, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force met far enough in advance to discuss specific plans and support requirements. Only then would the plan be sent to the State Department. At the same time, the air plan would go to Seventh Air Force. After review in Saigon, the plan would be forwarded through CINCPAC to the JCS for final approval.

The military chiefs sided with General Ryan, and asked Secretary of Defense Laird to seek State Department and CIA approval. Unfortunately, there is no record of any subsequent communication between Defense and State/CIA. A Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force operation plan dated February 1971 did set out Ryan's procedure, but it is not clear whether this had CIA concurrence or was a unilateral Air Force statement.[62]

Meanwhile, Vang Pao was digging in to meet the communist dry-season offensive. The embassy estimated it would take twenty-nine hundred fighter sorties a month to stop the enemy; the Air Force was prepared to furnish nine hundred. A typical daily mission order consisted of four A–1s and ten F–4s for close air support, with another twelve F–4s scheduled against interdiction targets. The quick reaction force was reduced to four aircraft for striking fleeting targets. At night, four AC–119s (three for interdiction and one for close air support) would be

59. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 120650Z Oct 70, USIA, 131051Z Oct 70; Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Oct 26, 1970.

60. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130438Z Oct 70, subj: Air Support for RLGAF; Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Dec 7, 1970; CSAFM L–18–70 to J–3, Planning for Combined Operations, Dec 17, 1970.

61. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Jan 18, 1971; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1970, p 21.

62. CSAFM L–18–70, Dec 17, 1970; *Chronology of JCS Recommendations Concerning Military Involvement in Laos* (Washington, 1972); Barrel Roll Operations Plan, 7th AF/13th AF, Feb 71.

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in the air. Other sorties (reconnaissance, forward air control, flareship, search and rescue, and escort) were to be flown as need be. If a crisis occurred, the sorties could be doubled and the aircraft massed to cope with the threat. This accorded with the Air Force policy of shifting the chief responsibility for close air support to the Laotians, and limiting USAF participation to those missions the T–28s could not handle.[63]

The embassy knew the RLAF was not up to the job. During October it had lost six out of forty-one planes and no replacements were due until April 1971. Even then, only nine aircraft were programmed over eighteen months against a projected attrition to sixteen aircraft. In the embassy view, the RLAF would "sag through" the dry season but could not be expected to generate more than fifteen hundred sorties, and half of these would be outside Barrel Roll.[64]

To make up the difference, Ambassador Godley suggested forty [redacted] T–28s be assigned to duty in Laos. These planes could fly nine hundred sorties a month at a cost of $1.27 million. State seconded the suggestion but Defense objected to the price tag. Instead, the Defense Department recommended building the RLAF to eighty-six aircraft over eighteen months. This would let the Laotians reach their goal of three thousand sorties a month, and allow the Air Force to shut down Barrel Roll operations. As an interim measure, Defense advocated shifting all of the Laotian T–28s to Barrel Roll.[65] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

Ambassador Godley endorsed the package of eighty-six aircraft for the RLAF but not any cutback in USAF sorties. He pointed out that the T–28 could carry only fifteen hundred pounds of bombs compared to six thousand pounds for the F–4. Besides being all-weather, the F–4 had a greater radius of action, could carry advanced munitions, and could operate in heavily defended areas that would be suicidal for the T–28. Thus, a one-for-one tradeoff would dilute overall capability and, no matter how many sorties the RLAF came up with, a minimum of nine hundred USAF sorties would still be needed. As to shifting all of the T–28s to Barrel Roll, the ambassador said existing facilities could not support that many planes, and in any event the regional commanders would be reluctant to part with any of their resources.[66] (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

In the end, the [redacted] proposal was scrapped, the eighty-six aircraft program for Laos approved, USAF sorties continued at their present level, and for the 1971 dry season, the embassy had to make do with what it had.[67]

RLC CIA

63. [redacted] Barrel Roll Operations Plan, 7th AF/13th AF, Feb 71.
64. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 071608Z Nov 70, 241050Z Nov 70, subj: Air Support for RLGAF; Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Dec 7, 1970.
65. [redacted] Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 130438Z Oct 70, 241050Z Nov 70, CINCPAC to SECDEF, 301908Z Nov 70, subj: Air Support for RLGAF.
66. [redacted] See note above.
67. [redacted] Hist, CINCPAC, 1970, II, 221.

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Chapter XVI

Staggering to a Cease-Fire (U)

Fortunately, the 1971 communist dry-season offensive lacked the intensity of the previous year. Although sorties were fewer, better weapons and delivery techniques and closer attention to targeting had hurt communist resupply. The depots on the Plain of Jars were only partially filled, and the North Vietnamese needed to use them judiciously. Prisoner reports revealed that medical supplies were especially hard to obtain. Each soldier carried less than the standard load of ammunition, and artillery rounds were carefully rationed. Nonetheless, the offensive posed a serious threat to government positions.

As soon as the rains slackened in November, the communists exerted more pressure on Vang Pao and drove him back from Phou Seu. Not until late January 1971, however, did the offensive really get under way. Muong Soui fell in early February and some enemy units again bypassed the Vang Pao line to strike directly at Long Tieng. The communists shelled the base periodically during February and March, but the one major attack took place on the night of February 13/14. The main action centered on Ban Na (Lima Site 15) and Tha Tam Bleung (Lima Site 72). By mid-February both sites were virtually surrounded and had to be resupplied by air. The communist attacks consisted chiefly of artillery fire and ground probes in lieu of massive infantry assaults. The defenders answered with counterbattery fire and occasional patrols to determine enemy strengths and dispositions.[1]

While the communists tightened their noose around the lima sites, the T–28s surged from twenty-two to forty-four sorties a day due largely to round-the-clock effort by American advisors. Seventh Air Force also doubled its sorties to sixty a day, twelve being placed on the quick reaction force, but this was a far cry from the two hundred sorties a day flown in 1970. Gen. Lucius D. Clay, Jr., Seventh Air Force commander, therefore insisted that only targets that justified an A–1 or F–4 would be struck and only if suitable control was available. To ensure effective control, Col. Hayden C. Curry (Colonel Tyrell's successor as air attaché) established a designated battlefield area (DBA) covering every enemy position that could directly threaten the Long Tieng complex. Within this area, a series of IFR (instrument flight rules) boxes were created where aircraft could strike using all-weather methods. These boxes as a rule contained the principal enemy staging bases and artillery parks. Elsewhere in the designated battlefield area, all strikes had to be made visually under the control of a Raven FAC. East of the DBA were three special operating areas. One embraced the enemy supply bases on the Plain of Jars, a second took in Ban Ban and Route 7 to the North Vietnamese border, and a third linked the first two. These were in effect free-strike zones where planes hit any target without prior validation or the aid of a forward air controller. Outside of the designated battlefield area and special operating areas, the normal rules of engagement governed.[2]

The designated battlefield area received the most USAF sorties. Between February 11 and March 30, 1,525 sorties struck visual targets in the DBA (337 of these were quick reaction force). Another 1,025 hit the IFR boxes, 503 hammered targets in the special operating areas

1. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1971, pp 27–28.
2. EOTR, Maj Gen Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF (Oct 70–Jun 71), Jun 30, 1971, pp 8–9.

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(over half of these in the Plain of Jars area), and 135 attacked elsewhere in Barrel Roll. Night support in the DBA came from five AC–119s joined by a pair of Laotian AC–47s. Even though the gunships were the lima sites' sole assistance at night, the AC–119 crews believed their relatively sophisticated weapon system could be of more use along the lines of communication where the communists were pouring trucks into Barrel Roll.[3]

Air Force preoccupation with the designated battle area offered the enemy some freedom of movement along the lines of communication. To restrict his restocking of supply depots, the B–52s returned to northern Laos in February. During the dry-season campaign 149 sorties were flown, mostly against supply depots on the plain. These strikes often achieved spectacular results, but the communists always had alternate routes and storage areas to turn to. Hence, they were somewhat better off at the end of the dry season than at the beginning.[4]

The forceful application of air power in the designated battlefield area kept the enemy from converting logistic success to tactical victory. The North Vietnamese hauled many antiaircraft guns right up to the frontlines. Even so, aircraft attacked the artillery sites almost as soon as they were set up, shattered troop concentrations, and constantly supplied the lima sites. When the rains began in April, the Meo gave up Lima Site 15 but the North Vietnamese made no move to take it over. Instead, they gradually withdrew to the east. Long Tieng was safe for another year.[5]

In February, seventeen thousand South Vietnamese thrust into the panhandle of southern Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail by seizing the logistic hub of Tchepone. Coincident with this operation (Lam Son 719), [redacted] settled on another attempt at cutting the trail from the west. Known as Desert Rat, the operation involved four guerrilla battalions that were supposed to cut Route 23 north of Saravane and then link up with the South Vietnamese. This would completely sever the North Vietnamese supply corridor and isolate the communists on the Bolovens Plateau.

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Like the Junction City, Junior, operation in 1970, Desert Rat met slight opposition at first. By February 20 the guerrillas had retaken Muong Phine, and on the twenty-third reached Ban Tang Vai just seven miles from Tchepone. Here, the North Vietnamese counterattacked vigorously and forced the Laotians onto the defensive. At the same time, Lam Son 719 was running into serious trouble. Although the South Vietnamese did get to Tchepone on March 7, the guerrillas could not break through to join them. The subsequent collapse of Lam Son 719 likewise doomed Desert Rat. As the South Vietnamese retreated to the east, the Laotian troops pulled back from Ban Tang Vai and then from Muong Phine. On March 21, the day the last South Vietnamese soldier departed Laos, the Desert Rats went back to Savannakhet. Following the failure of Lam Son 719/Desert Rat, the North Vietnamese secured their grip on southern Laos by driving the government forces totally off the Bolovens Plateau. They afterwards returned to the east, leaving the Pathet Lao and three regular battalions to hold their newly won territory.[6]

The question now was what action the allies should take during the wet season. In Washington the policy was one of disengagement and withdrawal, dictating that there be no major effort to regain lost territory. The approaches to Long Tieng would have to be cleared of the enemy, but beyond that Washington wanted the Laotians to center on securing the Mekong Valley and building up their own forces. In line with this policy, Seventh Air Force planned to reduce Barrel Roll sorties to thirty-two a day.[7]

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3. [redacted] Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Mar 30, 1971.
4. [redacted] Hists, SAC, FY 72, III, 419–20, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1971, p 20.
5. [redacted] Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1971, pp 22–23.
6. [redacted] *Ibid*, pp 27–28; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXXIX, 1–12, LXXX, 1–11.
7. [redacted] 7th AF OPlan 730/71, Southwest Monsoon Campaign Plan, May 5, 1971, Annex V, p 1.

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(S) However, the thinking in Washington and Saigon did not take into account the political or military realities of Laos. During the previous six months, a series of political maneuvers had greatly strengthened the southern faction within Souvanna Phouma's government. The southerners had long resented the attention being paid to Military Region II. Now, with the loss of the Bolovens Plateau, they were clamoring for more attention to their interests. This kind of pressure Souvanna could not ignore.

(S) Nor could Vang Pao simply sit on his hands. Though the immediate threat of Long Tieng had passed, the North Vietnamese had succeeded in restocking their supply depots on the Plain of Jars. Given the luxury of these forward bases, they could renew their offensive at an early date and make a lengthy defense of Long Tieng well-nigh impossible. Furthermore, intermittent negotiations between the government and the Pathet Lao had been going on since the beginning of the Paris peace talks. These discussions were clearly subordinate to the larger issues at stake in Paris. Still, both sides knew that once a settlement had been reached in South Vietnam a truce in Laos would follow. It was equally clear that such a truce would essentially freeze the situation along the existing battlelines. The king and prime minister had therefore ordered Vang Pao to seize as much territory as he could.

(S) While realizing he could not regain all of Military Region II, the Meo general did want to sweep across the plain, destroy the enemy depots as he had in 1969, and seize strong positions in the hills east of the plain.[8] At Udorn Maj. Gen. Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Deputy Commander, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, doubted if Vang Pao could carry out such an operation in view of the disparity in forces and the projected cutback in air support. He favored instead an air campaign against the communist supply bases, with Vang Pao occupying high ground to the north and southwest of the plain. From these strongpoints, he could send ground teams onto the plain to locate supply caches for air strikes.[9]

(S) The embassy was in an awkward spot. On the one hand, it reflected Washington's policy of "no offensive" and told the State Department that Vang Pao would merely conduct an "active defense" of Long Tieng.[10] On the other hand, the ambassador approved Vang Pao's plan and assured the prime minister of U.S. support. Finally, he apprised General Evans that if Vang Pao did go onto the Plain of Jars, he would be "off on his own" and no additional air support would be requested.[11]

(S) This competition over policy, strategy, and available resources cropped up in meetings of the Barrel Roll Working Group during the spring and early summer. Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force had a list of over two hundred fixed targets that had been confirmed by two or more intelligence sources. General Evans proposed a modest but systematic campaign to destroy these targets before they could be used against Vang Pao and to harass resupply efforts. Under this proposal, twelve F–4s and four A–1s would continue to assist Vang Pao's actions to clear the approaches to Long Tieng. Two F–4s would fly antiaircraft artillery suppression. Eight F–4s would hit fixed targets, with four more F–4s on ground alert (quick reaction force) for either close air support or fixed targets. At night, Evans wanted four AC–119s to patrol the roads leading into the Plain of Jars. Since these routes now bristled with antiaircraft guns, six F–4s would escort the gunships to provide flak suppression. The Thai-based wing commanders went even further. They wished to shift entirely to interdiction,

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8. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 081210Z Jun 71, subj: RLG Intentions in Plain of Jars, 291254Z Jun 71, subj: Military Planning Wet Season, 1971.
9. [redacted] Evans EOTR, Jun 30, 1971, p 17.
10. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 081210Z Jun 71.
11. (S) Intvw, Maj Richard R. Sexton, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Gen Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Dec 24, 1971; msg, Maj Gen Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to Gen Lucius D. Clay, Jr., Comdr, 7th AF, 291100Z Jun 71, subj: Wet Season Operations in Northern Laos.

[redacted]

leaving the Laotian T–28s and AC–47s to furnish close air support. Their plan specified twelve to sixteen F–4s to hit interdiction points and the rest to be used against fixed targets or for armed reconnaissance. They desired a change in the rules of engagement to permit strikes out to either 547 yards or 1,094 yards from a motorable road, since the communists were storing supplies in the open just beyond the present 219-yard limit.

The CIA member, however, recommended an increase to eighty sorties a day with all aircraft "dedicated" to close air support. Ostensibly these were required to counter "the continuing threat to Long Tieng," but in fact they would support Vang Pao's planned offensive. Colonel Curry, the air attaché, backed the CIA. He told the Thai-based wing commanders he was "not in the route structure business" and no change in the rules of engagement was contemplated.[12]

When the topic of a possible wet-season offensive came up, the Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force director of operations interrupted to remind the CIA "we've got to know these things." The CIA representative replied that the Air Force would be informed of specific plans "sufficiently in advance" to adjust its own plans. When pressed for more facts on the objectives and duration of the offensive, the CIA official responded by relating the overall American goals in Laos:

> 1. To protect Souvanna Phouma's government by stabilizing the military situation along the lines of the 1962 Accords.
> 2. Inflict maximum damage on NVA forces occupying and transiting Laos.
> 3. Document how the U.S. helped defend a country without the infusion of massive American manpower.[13] These were laudable aims in themselves but hardly the basis for planning a coherent air campaign.

Seventh Air Force eventually resolved the issue by agreeing to keep air support at the current level of sixty sorties a day until July 1. All aircraft, including gunships, were restricted to the designated battlefield area; twelve F–4s would be held on ground alert (quick reaction force) and the A–1s were given a dual mission. The A–1s principal role was search and rescue escort, and when not needed for this duty they were released to the Raven forward air controllers. Seventh Air Force did not put greater stress on lines of communication in northern Laos because the B–52s still covered the special operating areas, flying 270 sorties in these areas during the remainder of 1971.[14]

Meanwhile, Vang Pao did not wait on anyone. On April 15, he kicked off an offensive to secure the Vang Pao line. As in 1970, the North Vietnamese contested the initial advance, even bringing in helicopters to resupply their frontline troops. The helicopters flew only at night, but several of them were spotted in flight in early May and an AC–119 saw one land near Lima Site 15 on May 13. Nevertheless, it was not until ten days later that the embassy granted permission to engage the enemy helicopters. By that time, the communists had ceased their forward operations and stayed clear of the designated battlefield area.[15]

The communists also attacked Bouam Long (Lima Site 32). To counter this assault, the Air Force introduced yet another new weapon into Barrel Roll—a portable radar beacon whose signal could be picked up by a gunship's radar. A coded pulse let the operator pass information on the nature of a target (personnel, supplies, or vehicles) and its range and bearing, as well as the operator's location. This allowed a gunship to identify and attack enemy targets in any weather without need for voice communications. The combination of gunships,

12. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Mar 30, 1971, Apr 27, 1971, Jun 29, 1971.
13. See note above.
14. See note 12; hist, SAC, FY 72, III, 420.
15. JANAF Summary, May 26, 1971.

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tactical fighters, and stout ground defense beat back the assault. By the end of May, the enemy was forced to admit failure again.[16]

At this point, Vang Pao chose to ignore the three thousand North Vietnamese in the Long Tieng area and to strike directly for the Plain of Jars. In the three-pronged attack, one column moved south from Bouam Long, a second struck at the center, and a third advanced from the southwest. The operation was characterized as "defensive," but, in fact, marked the beginning of Vang Pao's attempt to seize the whole plain. In announcing the offensive to the Air Force, a CIA official noted:

> At Long Tieng it's time for Vang Pao to move out—and he has. Friendlies are now astride an enemy corridor. The enemy will have to react . . . Vang Pao has the initiative. He can strike towards Xieng Khouangville . . . or the PDJ. The latter would cause consternation in Washington. Friendly activities in general will increase now and will require more, not less, air support.[17]

This elicited a strong protest from General Evans. On June 29, he informed General Clay, Seventh Air Force commander:

> There has been a complete lack of coordination of the PDJ operation with 7/13 AF or your headquarters. I intend to discuss [the] subject with Ambassador Godley tomorrow on my farewell visit to Vientiane, but will have to leave followup action to General Searles.[18] In view of the current policy to wind down the war and decommit air and ground forces whenever possible, I feel the wisdom of a ground effort by Vang Pao at this time should be questioned. In addition, the continuing use of USAF strike sorties in support of this operation is not in accord with Ambassador Godley's statement to me that Vang Pao was off on his own.[19]

Clay replied that his decision to cut Barrel Roll sorties to thirty-two a day on July 1 remained firm. In view of the continuing offensive, most of the sorties would be close air support. Actually, the typical mission order for July listed thirty-three sorties a day. Twenty F–4s and four A–1s supported Vang Pao (ten of the F–4s were on quick reaction force), four F–4s hit fixed targets, and five gunships flew night close air support. Enemy antiaircraft fire had decreased as the rains increased, and the gunships were not working the lines of communication (where most of the remaining guns were concentrated). Hence, fighters escorts were no longer needed. The ten T–28s aiding Vang Pao proceeded to average thirty-five sorties a day, with between one and two AC–47 sorties a night. As U.S. air support diminished, the Laotians were again flying more sorties than the Americans.[20]

Despite less air support, Vang Pao advanced on the plain. He was now threatening their supply caches, so the North Vietnamese hastily withdrew from the Vang Pao line and assumed their old positions along Route 4/7. The enemy's 316th Division, mauled during About Face two years before, returned to Laos with many tanks. (The tanks normally served as mobile artillery rather than assault vehicles.) Such reinforcement in the wet season showed the extent of communist road building and the dearth of air activity over the lines of communication.

By mid-July, Vang Pao neared the main enemy positions and encountered stronger resistance. The battle swayed back and forth for the next six weeks, with neither side making

16. Richard R. Sexton, *Pave Mace/Combat Rendezvous* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1972), p 47.
17. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Jun 15, 1971.
18. Maj. Gen. Dewitt R. Searles, Evans' successor.
19. Msg, Maj Gen Andrew J. Evans, Jr., Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, to Gen Lucius D. Clay, Jr., Comdr, 7th AF, 291100Z, subj: Wet Season Operations in Northern Laos.
20. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Jun 15, 1971, Jun 29, 1971.

headway. Vang Pao was in a very vulnerable spot—unable to advance and unwilling to retreat. He therefore dug in and awaited the enemy counterattack. How long that blow could be delayed depended in large part on how the Air Force applied its thirty-two sorties a day.[21]

Under these circumstances, the fighter wings again called for a shift to interdiction to slow the communist buildup. The Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force target list had nearly three hundred sites, and the enemy brought in more supplies every day. The twenty F–4 close air support sorties a day were insufficient to support either offensive or defensive ground operations. In consequence, the wing commanders felt the sorties could best be employed to destroy the communist supplies before they could be used against Vang Pao. The CIA and air attaché nonetheless stood firm in their belief that first priority must be given to the ground forces. They proposed an increase from thirty-two to thirty-six sorties a day.

General Searles, who had replaced General Evans at Udorn on July 1, concurred. In lieu of fighting the ambassador as Evans had done, Searles tried to give him what he wanted. This was hard to do, for neither the ambassador nor the CIA would take Searles into their confidence. Even so, Searles pointed out to Seventh Air Force that the modest addition of four sorties a day would scarcely be felt in Steel Tiger, which received 250 sorties a day, while it would nearly double the firepower available to Vang Pao. Seventh Air Force assented to this request but put half of the sorties on quick reaction force.[22]

With the situation in northern Laos essentially frozen, attention turned to the south where a large-scale offensive, Operation Sayasila, was under way to recover the Bolovens Plateau.[23] Planned jointly by the Laotian general staff and the CIA, this was conceived as an all-Laotian operation. Eleven government battalions (about four thousand men) would be pitted against three North Vietnamese battalions (nearly eleven hundred men). The anticipated air support (thirty-five T–28 and two AC–47 sorties a day) would come solely from the Royal Laotian Air Force. Sayasila was expected to last thirty days and would consist of two phases. Phase I, scheduled for July 28, was a helicopter assault on Saravane intended to draw enemy attention away from the real objective, Pak Song. Phase II was a two-pronged attack on Pak Song scheduled for July 29. One column would advance along Route 23 while another force was airlifted to Lao Ngam and would approach from the north. The planners believed these multiple attacks would prevent the enemy from reacting effectively.[24] However, they seriously underestimated General Minh, the North Vietnamese commander in southern Laos, who proved himself a master tactician during the campaign.

Three days before the operation was due to begin, the CIA requested twelve USAF sorties a day to supplement the RLAF. After much pleading by the air attaché and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, Seventh Air Force agreed to the request.[25] The offensive's first move was unopposed and by noon the government forces had occupied the deserted town of Saravane. The North Vietnamese reacted swiftly and in a matter of days isolated the Saravane troops, who took no further part in the campaign. The initial landing at Lao Ngam was also uncontested, but the friendly forces halted seven miles from Pak Song. Meantime, the third column advanced toward the main communist positions at Ban Nhik. Since neither column was within supporting distance of the other, Minh made excellent use of his interior position to

21. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1970, pp 12–13.
22. Minutes, Barrel Roll Working Group, Jul 13, 1971, Jul 27, 1971; intvw, Maj Richard R. Sexton, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Gen DeWitt R. Searles, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Sep 15, 1971; EOTR, Maj Gen DeWitt R. Searles, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF (Jul 71–Sep 72), Sep 9, 1972, p 14.
23. For more extensive coverage of the Bolovens Campaign, see Donald G. Hukle, *et al*, *The Bolovens Campaign, July 28–December 28, 1971* (Proj CHECO, Hickam AFB, Hawaii, 1974).
24. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 250415Z Jul 71, subj: Air Support Request—MR IV.
25. *Ibid*; msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 250600Z Jul 71, subj: Air Support Request—MR IV.

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strike each of them in turn. After checking the main column at Ban Nhik, he slipped away to deal with the northern force, which was sitting idle. On August 11, Minh hit these troops, driving them back toward Lao Ngam in confusion. He then returned to Ban Nhik where the main column had taken advantage of his absence to occupy the town. On the eighteenth, the communist routed this force and retook Ban Nhik. They next countermarched to deal with the northern force, which had resumed its advance. On August 25, the government troops suffered their third straight defeat. By the end of the month they were in utter disarray, having lost a thousand men and achieved very little. Enemy losses were put at 170 killed.[26]

At this point, Colonel Curry, the air attaché, called for help. On August 31, he asked for forty-six sorties a day to blast a path for the friendly push that was set to restart on September 1. Because weather had hampered air operations in August, Curry set up a series of instrument flight rules bombing boxes over the principal communist positions.[27] With but eleven hours to fill their air request, Seventh Air Force diverted the additional aircraft from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The RLAF also upped its T–28 sorties to thirty-nine a day.

The combined weight of over seventy aircraft finally smothered the communist defenses. No matter which way Minh turned, his men were constantly hammered from the air. Behind this aerial barrage, the government troops moved forward. On September 15, they entered Pak Song as the North Vietnamese withdrew to the area of Thateng. The initial embassy report claimed that the government forces had fought their way into town "with the enemy offering tenacious resistance from heavily fortified positions beneath the houses."[28] Yet the next day the Army attaché visited Pak Song and found no sign of damage to any building.[29] Apparently the FAR had been able to do what armies had never been able to do before—destroy the cellars without destroying the house.

Even though Sayasila was counted a success, neither the planning nor execution justified optimism. Friendly casualties exceeded the total number of defenders, and only overwhelming air power had let the government troops achieve their objective. The repercussions of this operation were felt all the way to Washington, where the issue of joint planning had at last come to a head.

Vang Pao's offensive on the Plain of Jars and the Bolovens campaign raised serious questions as to who was running the war in Laos. Official U.S. policy was to hold a defensive position and limit American participation. Yet the embassy had approved two large offensives, albeit under considerable pressure from the Laotian government, and the Air Force was furnishing the air support.

On August 18 the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with CIA and State Department concurrence, issued a directive that any multibattalion operation requiring U.S. air support would need JCS approval at least ten days in advance. Requests had to include a detailed breakdown of the forces involved, objectives, duration, and specific air support requirements. Furthermore, the plan needed to be coordinated with Seventh Air Force and CINCPAC before being sent to Washington.[30]

In truth, the directive showed more of a desire to curb U.S. involvement than a concern for joint planning. Nevertheless, it did impose a set of constraints that forced the Air Force and CIA closer together. The CIA became less concerned for "security" and more willing to take the Air Force into its confidence. In turn, the Air Force evinced more interest in Barrel Roll

26. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1971, pp 23–24.
27. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 311330Z Aug 71, subj: Special Air Request—MR III.
28. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 151210Z Sep 71, subj: Special Laos Sitrep: Paksong.
29. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 171145Z Sep 71, subj: Materials Concerning Refugees and Related Subjects.
30. Msg, JCS to CINCPAC, 281548Z Aug 71, subj: Military Planning for Laos.

operations. Still, the directive created as many problems as it solved. The time consumed in securing coordination, review, and approval meant that initial planning had to begin twenty to thirty days in advance of an operation. In a status situation this worked well enough, but not in the swiftly shifting conditions of the communist dry-season offensive. Nor could old habits and long-standing institutional prejudices be removed overnight. Not until a year later were these problems really overcome.[31]

A number of other significant changes occurred in Laos during 1971. These stemmed from the continued withdrawal of American forces, the financial limitations of the Symington amendment, and the Paris peace talks. After more than a year of backing and filling, Ambassador Godley's blueprint for enhancing the Laotian armed forces emerged as the Laotian self-sufficiency program. Besides supplying modern equipment (M-16 rifles, 155-mm howitzers, and armored cars), the program sought to break down the feudal military structure by forming a national strike force of two divisions, one for northern Laos and one for the south. The divisions would be manned by mobile troops and report directly to the general staff. Garrison troops would stay under the military region commanders and the CIA retained control of the irregular forces. At the same time, a National Training Center was established to provide individual and unit training, previously handled by each local commander. By November 1971, eleven hundred recruits had graduated from the training center. Each "division" consisted of five battalions with a planned expansion to nine battalions as men became available. However, these forces were not put into the field until the following summer.

The self-sufficiency program was accompanied and made possible by a major political and military reshuffling within the Laotian government. Sisouk na Champassak became defense minister and deputy prime minister in August 1970. As such, he was clearly in line to succeed Souvanna Phouma who had suffered a series of heart attacks. Sisouk set out to destroy the regionalism that had hamstrung the development of an effective national army. First, he moved the general staff into the ministry of defense building where he could oversee its daily operations. In March 1971, he engineered the retirement of Ouane Rathikone as commander in chief and Oudone Sananikone as chief of staff. Bounpone Makthepharak was shifted to the largely ceremonial post as commander in chief, while Phasouk Somly took over as chief of staff. This made way for the emergence of a group of young, American-trained, nationally oriented officers typified by Col. Thao Ly in Military Region III. Of the "troika" that had replaced Phoumi Nosavan in 1965, only Kouprasith Abhay kept his position as Military Region V commander, but his influence was sharply curtailed.

In general, members of the nationalist (right wing) faction strongly advocated the self-sufficiency program. They favored vigorous prosecution of the war and opposed a peace settlement that left the North Vietnamese in control of any part of their country or grant any recognition of the Pathet Lao. Nonetheless, their ambitions often outran their capabilities. Though the reorganization purged some of the regionalism from the upper echelons of the army, it did nothing to revamp the underlying social structure.[32]

For the RLAF, the self-sufficiency program brought approval for expansion to eighty-six T–28s and the creation of a national strike squadron that could be shifted from one area to another. Consideration was given to replacing the T–28s with A–37s or F–5s, but these planes were too complex for the Laotians to operate, let alone maintain—they had a hard enough time just to keep the T–28s flying.[33]

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31. [redacted] *JCS Chronology* (Washington, 1973), p 15; Searles EOTR, Sep 9, 1972, p 7.
32. [redacted] Ltr, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Current Political Status, Aug 23, 1971; msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 010612Z Dec 71, subj: *Forces Armée Royale* Improvement.
33. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 231224Z Jun 71.

To inject real meaning into self-sufficiency and to make the RLAF stand on its own feet, Colonel Curry whittled down the air operations centers to four men each and gave strict instructions:

> You will not fly their missions. They will maintain their own airplanes. Tell them, show them, explain it to them and then back off. If they fall on their ass, so be it. That is the only way they will learn. If you do it for them they will never get up from the table.[34]

The results were predictable—the RLAF did "fall on its ass." The Laotians could fly well enough, but they simply could not generate the structure to support even the relatively unsophisticated T–28s and Colonel Curry had to abandon the idea of self-sufficiency for the time being. With new aircraft on hand and the Americans again taking an active management role, the RLAF made a rapid recovery. By the end of 1971, they attained the long-sought goal of three thousand sorties a month and 1972 plans specified an increase to five thousand (a level never achieved).

Curry also got excellent results by having the Ravens control T–28 sorties. When the T–28 pilots had picked their own targets, they dropped all their bombs on one pass. The Ravens carefully selected multiple targets and eventually convinced the Laotian pilots to make passes using one or two bombs at a time. This refined the efficiency of the RLAF far beyond the mere upturn in sorties.[35]

As part of the American withdrawal from Southeast Asia, the Air Force pared the number of Ravens from twenty-five to eight by December 1972. This prompted the founding of a Laotian FAC training program in November 1971. The air attaché chose the candidates from the best qualified T–28 pilots. In fact, the majority of the candidates had over three thousand combat missions! All candidates had to speak English; most were fluent in USAF terminology and jargon. The RLAF program contrasted with a similar one in South Vietnam. The Vietnamese had scant regard for forward air controllers, and therefore assigned their least qualified pilots to the program. In Laos Colonel Curry would have none of this. When General Sourith tried to palm off some of his liaison and transport pilots, Curry blocked the move.

Water Pump conducted the training that included sixty-four hours of flying the O–1 in a combat environment. After graduation, the Laotian FACs received a regional checkout from the senior Ravens at their assigned bases. The first class graduated in January 1972, and by December, twenty forward air controllers had been qualified. The Laotian FACs (called Nok Ka Tien) controlled solely RLAF sorties at first, but in September 1972, four were certified to control U.S. aircraft as well.[36]

Colonel Curry also set up a program to train a middle management cadre for the RLAF. The absence of such a group had been a chief reason for the failure of his first try to make the Laotian air force self-sufficient. Again the air attaché handpicked only the best line personnel. These men received formal instruction and on-the-job-training with their U.S. counterparts. By April 1972, this program had progressed to the point where the Laotian were handling all of their own in-country maintenance and supply. Major repairs were still done at Udorn, and the Americans controlled supplies until they were turned over to the Laotian supply people at the air bases. The final aspect of the self-sufficiency program was a plan to move the entire Water Pump program to Laos and turn it over to the RLAF. No firm date was set up for this action, and it did not occur until the truce in February 1973.[37]

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34. Intvw, Lt Col Robert G. Zimmerman, Ch/Oral Hist Br, AFSHRC, with Maj Roal S. Robinson, Jr., Nov 5, 1971, p 74.
35. Msg, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI to CINCPAC, 031230Z Dec 71.
36. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 280500Z Sep 72, subj: Rok Ka Tiens.
37. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to CSAF, 200730Z Apr 73, subj: Commando Cricket.

The War in Northern Laos

Emphasis on self-sufficiency and the Symington amendment restrictions also fostered a major realignment of the Military Assistance Program. On June 8, 1971, the Secretary of Defense directed CINCPAC to submit a plan to improve the management of the Laotian assistance program. CINCPAC took this opportunity to renew its efforts to establish a MAAG in Laos and to carve out an operational role for the Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand. The CINCPAC plan (prepared by the deputy chief of JUSMAGTHAI) called for changing the title to Military Assistance Coordinator, Laos (MACLAOS). The position would be filled by an Army general officer and the entire organization moved to Udorn. According to the proposal, MACLAOS would be "the principal military advisor to the ambassador." He would "coordinate, validate, and provide U.S. support of indigenous military operations," and would "coordinate embassy/CIA air support requirements with Seventh/Thirteenth Air Force."[38]

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Army Chief of Staff, strongly supported the proposal, as did the Navy. Elsewhere it met a chilly reception. The Air Force wanted neither another general officer position for the Army nor a new organization interposed between the embassy and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. The embassy concurred in the move to Udorn and had no objection to a general officer. However, it frowned upon the proposed title and functions. To the ambassador's ears, "MACLAOS" sounded too much like MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam). Nor did Godley feel the need for a "principal military advisor." He was quite content with the advice he was getting from his CIA station chief and the military attachés. He further found it "unacceptable" to place one more bureaucratic layer between himself and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. As he informed the Secretary of State, "the present system of command and control of in-country operations, directed by the ambassador through the country team works satisfactorily in the unique politico/military environment of Laos."[39]

Godley's biggest objection, however, was to the idea that the deputy chief of JUSMAGTHAI would "validate" requests which the embassy passed on from the Royal Laotian Government. This, he warned, would destroy the ambassador's influence with that government. As an alternative, the embassy recommended that the role of deputy chief be limited to that of "principal logistic coordinator" for U.S. support to indigenous military operations.[40]

After numerous exchanges, counterproposals, and reclamas, a joint State/Defense conference resolved the issue in the ambassador's favor. The deputy chief would move to Udorn where he would "pull together U.S. logistic support of indigenous military operations in Laos and manage the Laos MASF (Military Assistance Service Funded) program" to ensure compliance with the Symington amendment. An Army general would be appointed to the post, but there would be no change in his title and he would have no control over military operations. The roles of the CIA, attachés, and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force would remain unchanged.[41]

In November 1971, the move to Udorn was completed; and in February 1972, Brig. Gen. John W. Vessey, Jr., USA, took over as deputy chief of JUSMAGTHAI. While his charter was confined to coordinating logistic activities, Vessey did in fact become the ambassador's principal military advisor. This was due to his personality and his experience as a ground commander. He could comment with authority on CIA ground operations—something no USAF commander at Udorn had been able to do. According to Maj. Gen. James D. Hughes, new Deputy Commander, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force:

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38. Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 121235Z Jul 71; hist, CINCPAC, 1971, III, 422–24.
39. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 221025Z Jun 71, subj: US Support for Military Operations in Laos.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF to AmEmb Vientiane, 041841Z Sep 71, subj: US Support for Military Operations in Laos.

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> General Vessey's charter appoints him as the principal military advisor to the Ambassador. Initially, this position was probably not recognized either by the Ambassador or the other Country Team members. However, over the period of General Vessey's assignment, this attitude has gradually changed. I have been told in recent correspondence from the Ambassador to Washington, that the Ambassador did officially recognize and accept the DEPCHIEF as the principal military advisor.[42]

Vessey succeeded where the Air Force had failed in achieving a greater degree of coordination between the embassy and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. Having commanded troops in Vietnam, he had a better appreciation than the CIA of the need for joint planning and close cooperation between air and ground forces. As he gained the confidence of the ambassador and CIA, Vessey showed them how their operations could be improved by bringing the Air Force into the planning process. During the final year of the war, this greatly enhanced the effectiveness of air/ground operations.[43]

As the 1971 wet season drew to a close, the Laotian government seemed to be far stronger than in 1970. In the north, the communists had withdrawn about twelve miles from Luang Prabang. General Vang Pao had retrieved half of the Plain of Jars and sat facing the enemy along Route 4/7. To secure this site, a network of six mutually supporting infantry and artillery fire support bases were established. Behind this miniature Maginot Line lay the old Vang Pao line, with a final defensive point along Skyline Ridge between Sam Thong and Long Tieng. Manning the positions were about five thousand men formed into nineteen battalions [redacted] four Lao, and five Meo). The embassy thought these places could be held against the twelve thousand North Vietnamese, if "adequate" air support was available. To the south, Government troops had regained the Bolovens Plateau.[44]

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At the government level, the emergence of Sisouk na Champassak as Souvanna Phouma's heir-apparent marked the triumph of the "nationalists" over regional interests, and ended the political infighting that previously had crippled the government. Negotiations with the Pathet Lao had reopened and were progressing roughly parallel to the talks in South Vietnam. The self-sufficiency program had finally gotten under way and showed promise of furnishing a suitable military force by the summer of 1972.[45]

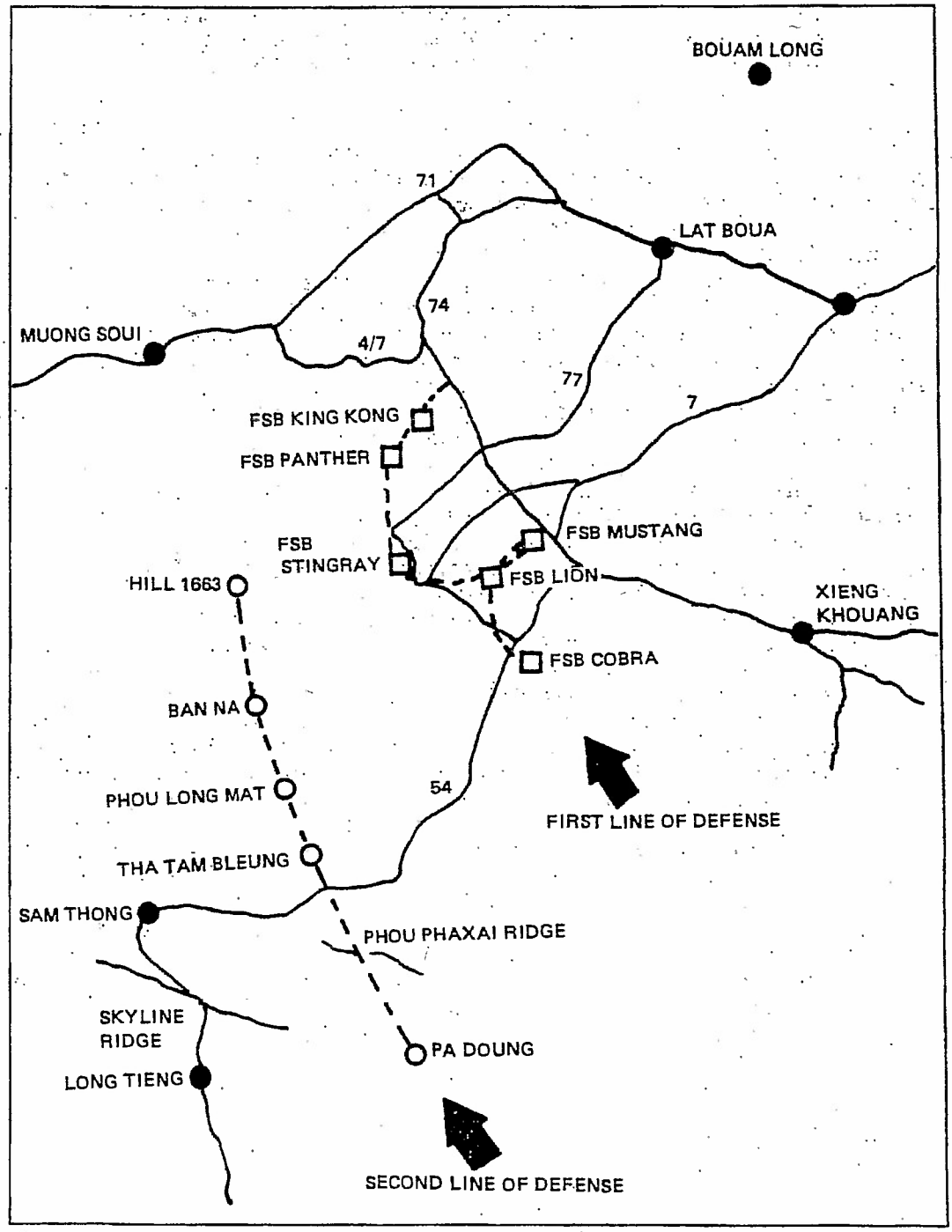
On the other hand, the persistent withdrawal of U.S. units made any rise in USAF sorties very unlikely and the Laotian air force was still struggling to get back on its feet. Even with air support, the existing government forces could not meet the North Vietnamese on anything approaching equal terms, and troop dispositions were not as good as they looked on paper. The two prior campaigns had proved "lines" to be meaningless concept in Laos. On both occasions, the communists had penetrated the Vang Pao line, and the mini-Maginot Line was just as porous. The North Vietnamese enjoyed better than a two-to-one advantage in numbers, and were sitting virtually on top of their forward supply depots. More ominous were the reports in early September that the foe was moving 130-mm guns and T–34 tanks into northern Laos.[46]

In the south, the government troops were scattered about the Bolovens Plateau, while the communists were concentrating around the town of Thateng. To strengthen and consolidate their position, the government forces tried to seize Thateng before the enemy began a counteroffensive. The plan envisioned a three-pronged assault, with two columns approaching from Saravane and Pak Song respectively while helicopters lifted a third force to a landing site

42. Intvw, Capt Peter A. W. Liebchen, Proj CHECO hist, with Maj Gen James D. Hughes, Dep Comdr, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 8, 1973.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, subj: Military Planning—Laos Dry Season 1971/72, Dec 8, 1971.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Searles EOTR, Sep 9, 1972, p 12.

UNCLASSIFIED

Plain of Jars Area
December 1971



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[redacted]

east of Thateng. The three forces would then converge on Thateng. Because of the JCS directive of August 28, planning was more thorough than for Operation Sayasila. The air support plan called for ten sorties on D-1 (November 20) to soften up enemy strongpoints. For the next two days, eighteen fighters and two gunships would fly cover for the helicopter landings. Thereafter, twenty-four fighters and two gunships were to furnish close air support for the attacking columns. The whole operation were supposed to last two weeks.[47]

The Joint Chiefs of Staff gave the green light on November 15 and the operation kicked off as scheduled on November 21. The enemy put up a stiff fight against the first helicopter assault, but fell back in the face of repeated air strikes. On the twenty-sixth, government troops swept into a deserted Thateng, the foe having slipped away. However, the North Vietnamese had not gone far. On December 6 they seized Saravane, which had been lightly garrisoned during the push toward Thateng, and doubled back to capture that town as well. This triggered an all-out collapse of the government operation. On December 18, Colonel Curry asked for sixty sorties a day to stem the tide, but a communist sweep on the Plain of Jars had siphoned off every available sortie, leaving only four F–4s to support the Laotian forces on the Bolovens Plateau. Deprived of needed air support, the Laotians hastily gave up Pak Song; and by the end of 1971, the enemy had recaptured the entire plateau.[48]

While the government positions on the plateau were collapsing in December, the communists loosed an assault on the Plain of Jars. Within seventy-two hours, every one of the fire support bases fell. Friendly casualties were 286 killed, 418 wounded, 1,500 missing, and 24 howitzers captured.[49]

Three factors accounted for this fiasco. First, the positions were for the most part untenable, being exposed, isolated, and static. The communists had had three months to reconnoiter these sites, prepare their plans, and bring up supplies with little interference from the air. In spite of repeated Air Force warnings in the fall of 1971, the CIA clung to its "defensive lines" concept like a child to a newfound toy. This view was nurtured—perhaps made necessary—by pressure from the Laotian government to hold onto as much ground as possible to use as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the Pathet Lao.

Second, the foe applied a simple but deadly tactic to neutralize the artillery sites. A heavy artillery barrage drove the defenders into their bunkers. Behind the barrage, the communists pushed right up to the perimeter. As the barrage lifted, they rushed the gun positions and shot the crews as they came out of their bunkers.

Last, the North Vietnamese covered their offensive by sending MiGs into northern Laos to challenge the bomb-laden USAF aircraft. At the approach of the MiGs, all propeller-driven planes withdrew to the west while the F–4s jettisoned their bombs and moved to intercept the intruders. In these initial engagements, the North Vietnamese pilots had a clear edge over the Americans. Since the 1968 bombing halt over North Vietnam, the American crews had concentrated on bombing at the expense of maintaining proficiency in air-to-air combat.[50] Hence, the U.S. pilots suffered from the equivalent of buck fever. Flight discipline was not kept, switches were improperly set, and missiles were fired while out of range. During the first engagement (December 17), three F–4s were lost due to inferior tactics and inexperience. The resulting rescue effort further diluted the number of aircraft available to support the ground forces.[51]

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47. [redacted] Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 151013Z Nov 71, subj: Air Support—MR IV.
48. [redacted] Searles EOTR, Sep 9, 1972, pp 16–17.
49. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 210820Z Dec 71, subj: MR II Situation.
50. [redacted] The last air-to-air combat had occurred on February 14, 1968. [*U.S. Air Force Combat Victory Credits, Southeast Asia* (Washington, 1974), 22.]
51. [redacted] Commando Hunt VII, 7th AF, Jun 72, p 179; *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*, LXXXIX.

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The War in Northern Laos

Seventh Air Force lost no time in countering this new threat. Specific crews in each unit were given the counterair mission. Old manuals were dusted off and practice missions flown to hone efficiency. In general these crews were held on ground alert. When radar detected MiGs heading for Barrel Roll, all propeller-driven aircraft were ordered to "clear the Barrel," and the interceptors took off to engage the enemy planes.[52] In the ensuing engagements the Americans gradually gained the upper hand, but no aircraft were lost by either side. The North Vietnamese next switched their tactics from outright attack to feints designed to interrupt close air support operations. The MiGs would enter Laos and make the "slow movers" abort their missions, but withdrew at the approach of the F–4s. It was not until February 21, 1972, that Maj. Robert A. Lodge and 1st Lt. Roger C. Locher bagged their first MiG. A week later, Lt. Col. Joseph W. Kittenger, Jr., and 1st Lt. Leigh A. Hodgdon scored a second victory. On March 30, Capts. Frederick S. Olmsted, Jr., and Gerald R. Volloy downed a third MiG to even the score.[53] On April 8, large-scale bombing of North Vietnam resumed as a result of the North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam. With their homeland under attack, the MiGs were forced onto the defensive and the air threat to northern Laos was eventually removed. Before this, however, they had made a notable contribution to the communist success on the Plain of Jars.

Following the loss of the Plain of Jars in mid-December 1971, the government troops had retreated to the Vang Pao line. The air attaché requested thirty sorties a day to assist the withdrawal. Seventh Air Force responded by allocating forty-six fighters and six gunships. Ten of the fighters, however, were kept on ground alert while four to six F–4s were assigned to meet the MiG threat. Ground haze and harassment by MiGs hampered these operations somewhat, but during the next thirty days an average of thirty fighters and five gunships hit their targets. Even so, enemy gunners downed six T–28s and two F–4s. Another F–4 was shot down near the border of North Vietnam by a surface-to-air missile fired from inside North Vietnam. The communist offensive also brought the B–52s back to northern Laos. During December, 111 sorties bombed enemy supply bases on the Plain of Jars. In January, 188 sorties struck in the same general areas.[54]

The air attacks did not deter the communists in their drive. On January 7, they attacked the Vang Pao line, and four days later the government troops abandoned these positions as well. In this assault, the North Vietnamese used 130-mm guns and T–34 tanks for the first time. The 130-mm gun fired a smaller shell and was less accurate than the 155-mm howitzer of the friendly forces, but it had a longer range (seventeen miles versus twelve). The communist guns did little physical damage, but the fact that they could remain outside the range of counterbattery fire demoralized the defenders. The T–34 tanks posed an even more serious threat. Formerly, the communists had used tanks as mobile artillery, but during the attack on the Vang Pao line they acted as assault vehicles. Since the government troops had no antitank weapons, the T–34s rolled right over their positions.

By the end of January, Vang Pao's forces had withdrawn to the Sam Thong/Long Tieng complex where they spent the next month preparing new defenses. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese spent most of their time building a road (Route 54) from the Plain of Jars toward Sam Thong. As the work progressed, the communists wheeled in an impressive array of antiaircraft artillery (including 86-mm guns) to protect the road crews.[55]

Though ground action was light from late January to early March, the Air Force upped its sorties to focus on destroying the 130-mm guns and disrupting construction of Route 54. A typical mission order for this period included sixty-four aircraft:

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52. [redacted] F–4s on bombing missions continued on, since after jettisoning their bombs they could outrun the MiGs.
53. [redacted] Hist, 432d TRW, Jan 1–Mar 31, 1972, pp 8–10; *U.S. Air Force Combat Victory Credits, Southeast Asia* (Washington, 1974), p 22.
54. [redacted] Commando Hunt VII, 7th AF, Jun 72, p 181; hist, SAC, FY 72, III, 423.
55. [redacted] Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1972, p 14.

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Staggering to a Cease-Fire

	Day
30 F–4s (10 on quick reaction force)	Interdiction/close air support
6 A–1s	Search and rescue escort/close air support
10 F–4s	MiG combat air patrol
2 RF–4s	Reconnaissance
4 OV–10s	Forward air control
2 OV–10s	Gun killing
4 F–4s	Gun killing
	Night
4 AC–119s	Close air support/armed recce
2 AC–130s	Armed recce

(In addition, 111 B–52s struck targets in the special operating areas during February.)

As it turned out, the 130-mm guns were hard to find and harder to hit. The sites were well camouflaged and were protected by heavy antiaircraft fire. Even when a gun was pinpointed and the F–4s broke through the defending fire, their 500-pound bombs were usually too inaccurate to do the job. The Air Force turned to laser-guided bomb, using OV–10s fitted with laser illuminators to spot targets for F–4s carrying the bombs. The slow speed and low altitude of the OV–10 made it very vulnerable to antiaircraft fire, while smoke and haze limited the success of the laser beam. All the same, between January and March, the teams destroyed three of the 130-mm guns and destroyed four more of them in April. During May and June, more guns were sighted, but by then the North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam had drawn off most all of the aircraft from northern Laos.

Strikes on Route 54 were similarly impeded by poor visibility and antiaircraft fire. Most of the fighters had to drop their bombs by loran or radar, which did not seriously interfere with the road building. The gunships were more successful, destroying or damaging 349 trucks in January. In February the score dipped to 314, and dropped to 289 during March when attention turned to the defense of Long Tieng itself.[56]

Back in Washington, State, Defense, and CIA officials met to consider conditions in northern Laos. Fearing another Dien Bien Phu, they believed it would be a mistake to try to hold Long Tieng. They favored a "forward defense" from positions in front of Long Tieng, forcing the enemy to mass so he could be hit by air strikes. When their positions could no longer be held without incurring undue casualties, the friendly forces would withdraw to points southwest of Long Tieng. From there they could conduct a "mobile defense" of Vientiane. This would compel the communists to stretch their lines of communication and expose them to further air attack.[57]

No matter how comfortable this strategy was to Washington planners, it simply did not comport with the real situation in Laos. Words like "forward defense" and "mobile defense" had no more meaning in Laos than the concept of defensive "lines," and the only suitable positions in front of Long Tieng were already in enemy hands. Likewise, no suitable positions existed between Long Tieng and Vientiane; and, in any case, Vang Pao lacked the resources to pursue the strategy conceived in Washington. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese had long since learned the folly of massing in the face of air power. Their favorite tactic was to force the defenders to concentrate in a place that could be isolated. Their own troops were dispersed on at least three

56. *Ibid*, pp 14–15; hist, SAC, FY 72, III, 423.
57. Msg, SECSTATE/SECDEF/CIA to AmEmb Vientiane, 219025, Jan 28, 1972.

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sides and made excellent use of weather, foliage, and camouflage to mask their movements. This sharply curtailed the worth of air strikes. The communists next softened up the defensive positions with artillery, rocket, and mortar fire. The effect of this fire was increased since they were firing into the center of a circle, while the return fire from the defenders was diffused since it was directed outward. The North Vietnamese infantry took up their final assault positions in small groups to avoid air strikes and converged only at the last moment.

The enemy surmounted the problem of exposed lines of communication by constructing alternate routes and redundant supply depots, all well defended by antiaircraft guns. In light of the limited sorties given northern Laos, the Air Force could not sustain a systematic campaign against these lines of communication and come up with the desired level of close air support at the same time. Thus, in the final analysis, it was Long Tieng or nothing.

By early March, Route 54 was finished all the way up to the Sam Thong valley, and the North Vietnamese started to move up their armor and artillery. The battle erupted on March 11 with an artillery barrage followed by armor and infantry attacks on Sam Thong. Embassy dispatches depicted the fighting as "savage" and "bitter" and reported hand-to-hand combat throughout the valley as positions were lost, regained, and lost again. Until they exploded, burning tanks continued to fire their guns. The defenders attacked enemy armor with nothing more than rifles and grenades. Like the "fighting" at Pak Song, these reports may be somewhat exaggerated, but both sides probably did endure heavy casualties.

Gunships, tactical fighters, and B–52s added to the carnage by pummeling enemy forces close to the friendly positions. The battle's smoke and dust mixed with the normal ground haze to limit visibility, and the intermingling of government and enemy units further complicated target identification. However, U.S. and Laotian aircraft continued to pour bombs and bullets into the valley. Of particular note were the B–52 strikes. During March, the heavy bombers hit 106 targets in the Sam Thong/Long Tieng area, flying 318 sorties. Unlike early operations, which were confined to the special operating areas, most of these sorties directly supported the ground forces.[58]

After a week of bitter fighting, Vang Pao had to give up Sam Thong, but it was another Pyrrhic victory for the enemy. Momentum carried the North Vietnamese onto Skyline Ridge, but they could go no farther. By the end of March the battle had largely burned itself out. The communists owned Sam Thong and Skyline Ridge, while ground action shrunk to minor clashes and sporadic 130-mm fire. During April and May, the onset of the rainy season slowed resupply to their forward units and the North Vietnamese began to pull back toward the Plain of Jars.

At this point, Colonel Curry suggested it was time to shift the air effort to interdiction. If Route 54 could be blocked between Sam Thong and the Plain of Jars, the communists might be trapped in the valley. At least they could not get their 130-mm guns out. He accordingly proposed that in April thirty-six sorties a day be used to choke off Route 54.[59]

On March 30, 1972, however, the war in Southeast Asia took a dramatic turn as the North Vietnamese openly invaded South Vietnam. In the following months, every available aircraft was used to repel the invasion or to strike North Vietnam. (The bombing of North Vietnam resumed on April 6.) Only an occasional divert was sent to Barrel Roll, so the communists were able to leave Long Tieng with relative ease. Vang Pao trailed the retreating enemy cautiously, and by June, the government troops secured the Long Tieng/Sam Thong complex and seized the Vang Pao line. There they rested while the embassy planned a wet-season offensive.

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58. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 140625Z Mar 72, subj: Defense of Long Tieng/Sam Thong; hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1972, pp 19–20.

59. Msg, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 051400Z Apr 72, subj: Air Support Request.

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Staggering to a Cease-Fire

(S) Since the Meo had ceased to exist as an effective fighting force, the main brunt of the offensive would be carried by eight thousand [redacted] "irregulars" formed into five task forces (Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, and Echo). One group (Alpha) was to secure the Long Tieng area as the other four approached the Plain of Jars from separate directions. Embassy officials hoped this maneuver would saturate the enemy defenses and prevent a strong reaction to any of the columns. The air support plan specified twenty F–4s and six A–1s to aid the ground advance and ten F–4s to hit supply areas and lines of communication. At night, four AC–119s would assist the ground forces while a single AC–130 patrolled the lines of communication. In addition, the embassy asked for one B–52 strike of three aircraft a day with a surge to three strikes a day if needed. Daily, the RLAF was to fly between sixty and eighty T–28 sorties and three to four AC–47 ones.[60] (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

(S) The operation got under way on August 15. Conditions in South Vietnam had calmed down enough that Seventh Air Force could furnish the requested sorties, but weather proved to be the sticking point. Through the rest of the wet season, tactical air strikes averaged but eighteen a day. The B–52s took up some of the slack by flying an average of six sorties a day, but most of them were against supply areas and did not contribute directly to the ground campaign.

(S) Early on, the troop deployments were virtually unopposed, [redacted] then took up defensive positions instead of advancing onto the plain. When the various units did begin to move, their actions were uncoordinated and they were not in supporting distance of one another. Part of the problem lay in Vang Pao's leadership style. He relied upon personal charisma and instinct rather than orderly staff work and military structure. Consequently, he excelled as a guerrilla leader but could not coordinate the movement of large bodies of regular troops. Then, too, the [redacted] did not display the initiative that would have been expected from the Meo in a similar situation. Thus, the communists succeeded in shifting their forces to defeat each task force in turn. On September 16, General Hughes, deputy commander of Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force reported: (b) (1) (b) (3) (S) (b) (1) (b) (3) (S)

> Looks like Vang Pao has his units out of sync. They have not been able to mount a five-front attack. Thus the enemy, with superior discipline, leadership, etc., has been able to use their assault forces and systematically take on each unit one at a time (Delta, then Echo, and now Bravo) and chew them up. We could see this coming over the last few days as enemy units were repositioned around Bravo. Task Force Bravo is Vang Pao's best. If they go down the tubes, there is little chance of Vang Pao making any significant gains this season.[61]

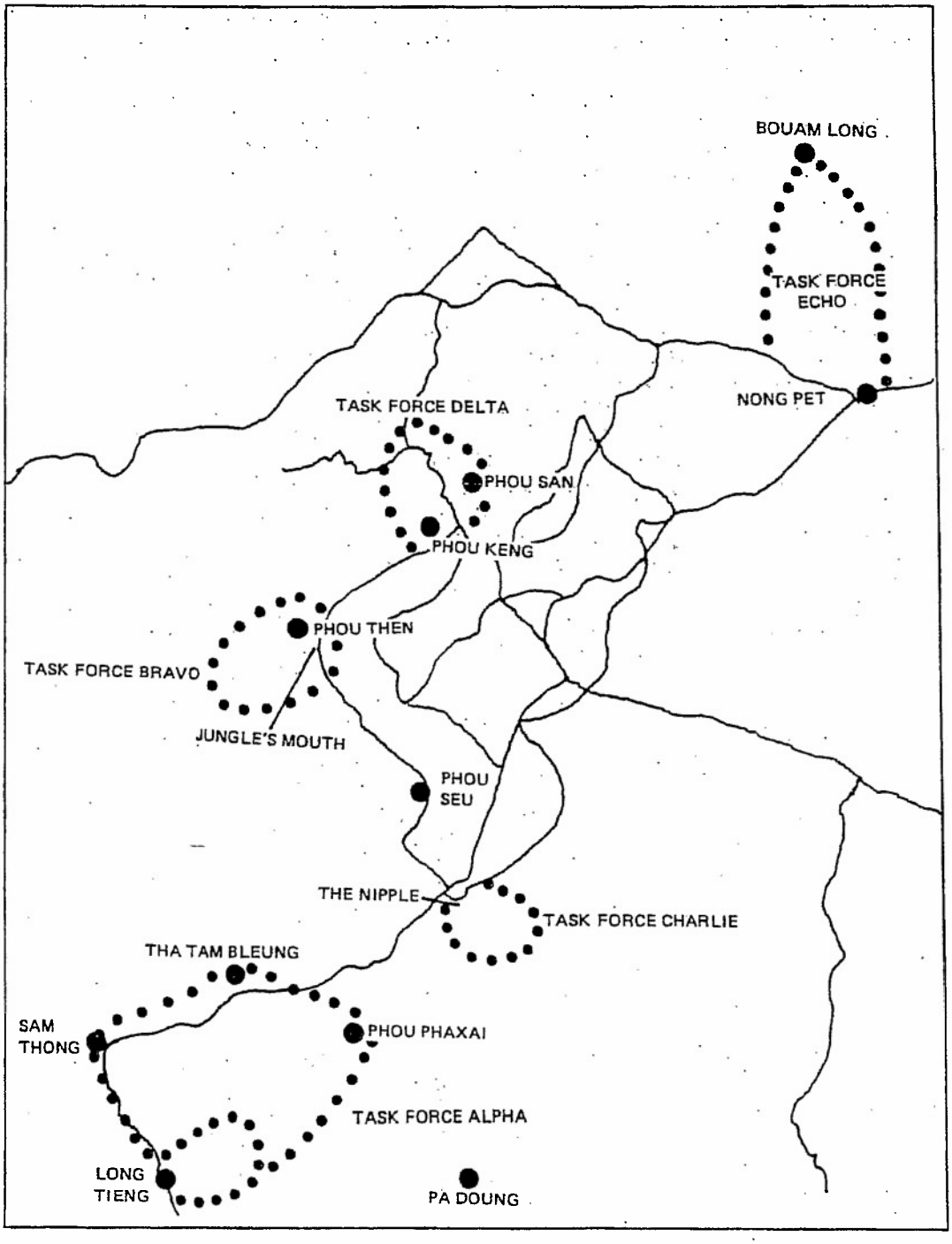
(S) Vang Pao, backed by the CIA, tried to blame inadequate air support for his lack of success. Meeting with Gen. John W. Vogt, Jr., Seventh Air Force commander, Vang Pao said he would have to decide in the next few days whether to continue the offensive. He warned that his decision would depend in large measure on the extent of U.S. air support.[62] General Vogt later reported:

> I explained to General Vang Pao that all the Tacair in the world couldn't help them in the kind of weather we had encountered up there in the last two weeks. As a matter of fact, we had an F–4 and O–1 Raven FAC collide yesterday, trying to work under these difficult conditions. On top of all that Vang Pao's forces are simply no match for the NVA. After extensive discussions, I am convinced Vang Pao's plans are far too

60. (S) Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 250700Z Jul 72, SECSTATE/SECDEF/CIA to AmEmb Vientiane, 120300Z Aug 72, subj: Approval of Operation Phou Phiang, AIRA Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 120300Z Aug 72, subj: Air Support Request.
61. (S) Msg, 7th AF/13th AF to 7th AF, 161055Z Sep 72, subj: Operation Phou Phiang.
62. (S) Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 011505Z Oct 72, subj: Operation Phou Phiang.

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> ambitious for his capability. He insists he can retake the PDJ if we give him air support, while I believe the best we can hope for is to secure some limited objective. We will attempt to give him whatever air can be profitably used since, if nothing else, he needs a morale boost. He does need to pare down his ambitious plans, however, since as the rout of his two Groupes Mobiles so vividly demonstrated, his troops are simply not capable of handling NVA regulars.[63]

In the end, Vang Pao did renew the offensive but with no more success than before. Perhaps the most significant action occurred on October 9 when two North Vietnamese Il–28 Beagles[64] bombed Bouam Long. The attack did little physical damage but acutely embarrassed the Americans, since the planes had not been picked up on radar until after they had dropped their bombs. The main result of the incident was that the Air Force enlarged its combat air patrol, leaving fewer aircraft to support the ground forces. Vang Pao finally called off the offensive on November 18, and ordered his units to take up defensive positions around Long Tieng. During December both sides rested, refitted, and repositioned supplies for the dry-season campaign.[65]

With ground action at a standstill, the Air Force focused on interdiction. A major innovation was the coming of F–111s to northern Laos. These planes had appeared briefly in Southeast Asia just before the 1969 bombing halt. They were reintroduced in the summer of 1972 as part of the Linebacker I strikes against North Vietnam. When that operation wound down, the F–111s conducted missions in Barrel Roll. To enhance the F–111s, a series of radar beacons were deployed to various sites in northern Laos, and the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing used them in a photomapping project. Designated Sentinel Lock, the new program produced photomaps referenced to the beacon location. From November 11, 1972, to the cease-fire on February 22, 1973, the F–111s flew 2,392 missions using Sentinel Lock. Of these, 2,183 (91 percent) were successful, with extremely high delivery accuracy.

The B–52s achieved comparable accuracy with Sentinel Lock, which was by far the best all-weather delivery technique used during the war. During mid-November to mid-December, B–52s and F–111s joined F–4s and A–7s in pounding the enemy lines of communication and supply depots on the Plain of Jars. (A–7s had replaced the A–1s at Nakhon Phanom on November 7.) It was impossible to gauge the precise effect of this bombing, but through the following dry season, the communists could not sustain a drive on Long Tieng.[66]

In southern Laos, the government's wet-season offensive was more successful than in the north. This all-Laotian operation constituted the first major test of the self-sufficiency program. Surprisingly, the FAR did quite well, for the first time showing a clear superiority over the Pathet Lao, although the results might have been different had the North Vietnamese not been fully committed to the invasion of South Vietnam and been able to take part in the campaign. By early December, the government troops had reoccupied the Bolovens Plateau, including the towns of Saravane, Thateng, and Pak Song. However, the return of North Vietnamese regulars during December boded ill for the widely dispersed government units.[67]

In northern Laos, the North Vietnamese offensive got under way on December 12 when the communists again slipped past the Vang Pao line to hit Long Tieng. As enemy infantry and artillery units entered the area, F–4s, A–7s, and AC–130s attacked troop concentrations, artillery sites, and other targets of opportunity. When bad weather closed in, B–52s and F–111s took over and used the Sentinel Lock beacons. In December, the Air Force flew 957 strike sorties in Barrel Roll (522 F–111, 230 F–4, 116 A–7, 57 B–52, and 32 AC–130). The RLAF contributed 2,200

63. Msg, 7th AF to CSAF, 151015Z Nov 72 subj: Daily Situation Report.
64. The Il–28 was a twin-engine jet bomber built by the Russians during the 1950s.
65. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1972, pp 42–43.
66. Study, 7th AF/13th AF, F–111/AN/PPN–18 Beacon Employment in Southeast Asia, Mar 19, 1973.
67. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 081114Z Dec 72, subj: Enemy Intentions for Dry Season Campaign.

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T–28 sorties. This huge air effort smothered the attackers. After a week of punishment from the air, the North Vietnamese pulled back from Long Tieng and attacked Bouam Long.[68]

Three North Vietnamese regiments began the assault on Christmas night, and the Air Force adjusted its missions to meet the new threat. Once more the communists made no headway, and by year's end had settled down to a conventional siege. The end of operations against North Vietnam (January 15, 1973) released more aircraft to Laos. In January, USAF sorties rose to 2,098 (837 F–111, 827 A–7, 235 F–4, 126 B–52, and 73 AC–130). These strikes prevented any further ground attacks.

The chief problem for Bouam Long's defenders was the steady bombardment from the 130-mm and 122-mm guns. As during the previous year, the guns were well camouflaged and protected by antiaircraft guns. On December 17, a special meeting at Udorn covered ways of silencing these guns. During the conference Colonel Curry observed, "They [the North Vietnamese] are just as oriented as we are in doing the same thing over and over again." He therefore suggested that the logical starting place to search for the guns should be their earlier locations. Acting on this assumption, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force prepared a chart showing the location of every gun sighted during the past campaign. The Ravens and photo-reconnaissance crews gave these positions special attention, and found the guns still there. The Air Force started destroying them one by one with laser-guided bombs and hit seven of the big guns during December. In January, the count rose to eleven 130-mm and seven 122-mm guns, with seven more 130-mm and four 122-mm guns destroyed in the final month of the war.[69] It should be noted that the number of guns destroyed represents the number claimed. As with truck kills, this may be subject to some inaccuracies and multiple counting.

Having failed to take a single friendly position, the communists called an early halt to their offensive on February 1. As the North Vietnamese fell back to consolidate their hold on the Plain of Jars, the Pathet Lao made their first substantive proposal for negotiations.[70] They suggested: "1) A private meeting between Souvanna and Souphanouvong, 2) Resumption of confidential procedural talks, and 3) An immediate meeting of a subcommittee of the government and Pathet Lao in restricted secret talks."[71] Notably absent from this proposal was the earlier demand for a halt to U.S. bombing as a precondition for negotiations.

While these talks went on, sporadic clashes continued but relatively little ground changed hands. Air Force operations over this period declined slightly as 1,978 sorties struck targets throughout Barrel Roll (778 F–4, 475 A–7, 325 F–111, 275 B–52, 89 A–6 [U.S. Marine Corps] and 36 AC–130s.) In its final effort, the RLAF added 4,418 sorties! The Laotians eventually agreed to a cease-fire on February 21 that took effect at noon the following day.[72]

In the south, the communist offensive did not get under way until December 22, 1972, but it swiftly gathered momentum. Thateng, Saravane, and Lao Ngam were lost in January 1973, and the enemy massed for an assault on Pak Song. On the night of February 8, the North Vietnamese mounted their attack, spearheaded by six tanks. The Laotian commander called for air support, and an AC–130 Spectre was diverted to the scene. The gunship picked up the tanks on its sensors and asked for clearance to fire. The ground commander granted his permission, even though he did not have the authority to validate targets. Because of the sensitivity of the political negotiations, Ambassador Godley had decreed that only the assistant air attaché at

68. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF, Jul 1–Dec 31, 1972, pp 44–45.
69. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF ADVON, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1973, pp 12–13; intvw, Maj William W. Lofgren, Jr., Proj CHECO hist, with Col Hayden C. Curry, AIRA Vientiane, May 30, 1973.
70. The start of the cease-fire in South Vietnam on January 28 might have played a part in this decision.
71. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 061025Z Feb 73, subj: Immediate Problems Relating to Cease-fire in Laos.
72. Hist, 7th AF/13th AF/13th AF ADVON, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1973, p 23.

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Savannakhet could validate targets in southern Laos and then solely in line with very strict guidance. General Vogt, Seventh Air Force commander, later described what happened:

> The Spectre began the laborious process of contacting the guy in Savannakhet, trying to describe the ground situation in the area, trying to assure him that all the rules of engagement were being observed, and ultimately trying to get authority to hit those tanks. It took him 27 minutes to get this authority. In the meantime he had exhausted his fuel and had to return to base. He was never able to attack the tanks and, as a result, the tanks came in and overran the positions.[73]

Understandably, the Laotian commanders were upset, blaming the Air Force for the debacle. When word of this reached Saigon, General Vogt flew to Pakse to look into the matter first hand. At a meeting with Brig. Gen. Soutchay Vongsavanh, the Military Region IV commander, Vogt put his finger squarely on the problem. "The restrictions imposed by our Embassy in Laos led to this rout and the loss of these forces." He added that he did not intend to place blame for the fiasco but rather try to salvage the situation. General Vogt told General Soutchay there was no use belaboring the past. Instead they needed to devise a plan to retake Pak Song. The CIA representative objected to this suggestion:

> General, there is no way you can retake Paksong! We're through! That's a crack NVA outfit and these guys are no match for that kind of force! The enemy has moved up 122-mm guns and they are pounding the friendlies to pieces just as they did the other day when they attacked Paksong! There is no way we can destroy them. These little guys have been fighting for a long time. They are exhausted and their casualties are high. We have to forget about retaking Paksong.[74]

General Vogt replied: "I refuse to accept this. We have all this air capability, and I am willing to employ it if it is used properly." He asked General Soutchay if his troops could make the effort, and Soutchay agreed to try. Vogt depicted the ensuing events:

> We laid out a detailed plan. I put B–52s in there in advance of the execute date of the operation and softened up the area. I put FACs in the areas where the 122-mm guns were known to be and although we didn't know the exact gun positions, the FACs were there waiting for them to fire. As soon as they opened fire, they revealed their positions! TACAIR was hanging on tankers just waiting for the word to strike and destroy this artillery. We likewise had TACAIR overhead the day the operation kicked off and within two days we had retaken Paksong! It was the greatest victory they had ever received in southern Laos! It completely revitalized all the fighting forces in Laos. News of the victory spread like wildfire through every echelon of command throughout the entire country. The number one fighting force of the NVA in [southern] Laos had been whipped! The troops had tremendous pride in what they had done, and rightly so.[75]

During the operation, 155 F–4s, 76 B–52s, 50 A–7s, and 49 F–111s supported the friendly forces. They simply blew the defenders away and on February 12 the government flag again flew over Pak Song.

Unfortunately, the story had an unhappy ending. After the victory, General Vogt warned the ambassador that if there was a cease-fire and air power was withdrawn, the enemy would retake Pak Song. The CIA station chief replied: "They wouldn't dare do that after a cease-fire goes into effect! That would be an open and flagrant violation of the agreement! They wouldn't think of doing that."[76] At noon on February 22, General Vogt withdrew all U.S. air power from

73. Intvw, Maj William W. Lofgren, Proj CHECO hist, with Gen John W. Vogt, Comdr, 7th AF, May 28, 1973.
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*
76. *Ibid.*

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Laos in agreement with the terms of the cease-fire. Fifteen minutes later, the North Vietnamese drove the government forces out of Pak Song and off the Bolovens Plateau for the final time. In retaliation, nine B–52s struck communist positions around Pak Song on February 23 but there was no follow-up ground action. This was the last USAF mission in southern Laos.[77]

Sparring went on in the north until mid-April, in spite of the cease-fire, as each side engaged in a last-minute land grab. In general, the North Vietnamese got the better of this exchange, seizing Muong Soui, Sala Phou Khoun, and Tha Viang. In retaliation, the Air Force flew forty B–52 and twenty-four F–111 sorties on April 15, 16, and 17, 1973—the last USAF bombing sorties in Laos.[78]

77. *Ibid*; hist, 7th AF/13th AF/13th AF ADVON, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1973, pp 26–30.
78. Hists, 7th AF/13th AF/13th AF ADVON, Jan 1–Jun 30, 1973, p 23, SAC, FY 73, I, 279–280, CINCPAC, 1973, I, 210.

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[redacted]

Epilogue

1973–1975 (U)

The cease-fire agreement of February 21, 1973, essentially confirmed the 1962 Geneva accords and called for the establishment of a provisional Government of National Union to organize elections for a permanent government. Within sixty days after formation of the provisional government, all foreign military forces would have to withdraw from Laos.[1] Negotiations on the specific composition of the provisional government dragged on for over a year, punctuated by occasional armed clashes. During this period, the embassy drew up plans for the peacetime structure of the Laotian armed forces.

At the time of the cease-fire, government forces stood at 89,650 men. The Royal Laotian Army, including the 2,300-man air force, consisted of 48,150 men. Tribal irregulars numbered 25,500 (about half of them Meo), and the remaining 16,000 were [redacted] Supporting the Laotian forces were 1,711 Americans, with an additional 474, including the CIA and requirements office, assigned to the embassy. The military attachés accounted for 184, and the two airlines, Air America and Continental Air Service, employed 519 people. At Udorn, 316 personnel were assigned to the Water Pump detachment and 218 to the Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand. (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

Communist forces totaled 108,500—37,000 Pathet Lao and 71,500 North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese forces were made up of 50,000 combat and support troops formed into three divisions (312th, 315th, and 316th) and three independent regiments (184th, 335th, and 336th), with 21,500 "advisors" assigned to Pathet Lao units. The communists controlled about two-thirds of the territory in Laos and one-third of the population.[2]

Embassy officials believed that once a provisional government was set up, most of the North Vietnamese combat forces would leave. However, the advisors and some combat troops were expected to stay in Laos to ensure the Pathet Lao's adherence to Hanoi and to sustain its military structure, which was as fragile as the government's. For the Americans, the task was to see that the government forces remained strong enough to balance the communist side. Cutting the military assistance budget for fiscal year 1974 from $300 million to $100 million made this harder to achieve. Indeed, money and not military necessity played the greater role in fashioning the Laotian military structure.

In view of the limited financing, embassy plans specified a peacetime military establishment of forty-six thousand men. The [redacted] irregulars would be withdrawn and most of the tribal irregulars disbanded. Marginal army units would likewise be dissolved and the remaining tribesmen integrated into the regular component. The Americans felt that this force could be supported on a yearly budget of from $60 million to $80 million, and hoped that it would be able to handle the Pathet Lao. (b)(1) (b)(3) (S)

The embassy also planned to diminish its own size by over 50 percent. The biggest change was to be in the attaché setup. The separate attachés would be replaced by a defense attaché office of thirty military and fifteen civilian personnel. The surplus people would be

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1. [redacted] Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 211324Z Feb 73, subj: Laos Situation Report.
2. [redacted] Msgs, JANAF Attaches Vientiane to 7th AF/13th AF, 240500Z Feb 73, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 221131Z May 73, subj: Quarterly Report to SFRC on Laos.

[redacted]

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transferred to the JUSMAGTHAI deputy chief, who would report directly to the defense attaché as would the Water Pump detachment. The requirements office would likewise be assigned to the JUSMAGTHAI deputy chief and redesignated a forward supply element.

This was in essence the structure that had been proposed by the Defense Department for ten years. Embassy objections during that time had always been based on the 1962 Geneva accords. Although the cease-fire agreement confirmed these accords, they seemed to no longer stand in the way of creating a defense attaché office in Vientiane.

(b)(1)
(b)(3)
(S)

Along with slight cutbacks in the staffs of the Agency for International Development and the United States Information Service, the changes included phasing out Air America and Continental Air Service. To avoid a precipitous collapse of government forces, the embassy plan would be implemented in stages. These would be geared to the negotiations on a provisional government and would be finished within sixty days after that government had been organized.[3]

On August 8, the defense attaché office was formally created, with Brig. Gen. Richard G. Trefry, USA, as defense attaché. Col. Albert J. DeGroote took over as air attaché and assistant defense attaché. In spite of this paper change, the old air attaché and Army attaché organizations continued intact as did the requirements office, JUSMAGTHAI deputy chief, and Water Pump. Trefry and DeGroote's first job was to meld these separate and at times antagonistic activities into one coherent structure. They further needed to redirect the Military Assistance Program from support of combat operations to building a peacetime armed force. To do this the separate Army attaché and air attaché offices were replaced by an integrated one. In addition, the operations centers of the Army attaché and the air attaché were closed, the remaining Ravens sent home, and USAF personnel transferred from the air operations centers. Concurrently, the defense attaché started to exercise direct supervision over the whole Military Assistance Program including the actions of the JUSMAGTHAI deputy chief, Water Pump, and the requirements office. This was not done without some resistance from entrenched interests. By April 1974, however, the defense attaché office was functioning fairly smoothly.[4]

The second job was to develop the ability of the Royal Laotian Air Force, so it could sustain itself without American involvement. This effort was interrupted by a final quixotic attempt to overthrow the government. On the morning of August 21, 1974, Brig. Gen. Thao Ma (the exiled air force commander) and a group of followers crossed to Vientiane. They drove to the airport where Thao Ma announced a revolutionary government to head off a communist takeover of the country. Rumors of the coup had been circulating for weeks and blue scarves had been passed out to potential supporters. Hence the actual coup came as no surprise. Despite Thao Ma's professed goal of preventing a communist takeover, his sole specific objective seemed to have been the elimination of his archenemy, Maj. Gen. Kouprasith Abhay, since his first order was to bomb Army headquarters in Vientiane. (Thao Ma was never much of a planner.) Many of the T–28 pilots retained affection for their former commander and were willing to do his bidding. Yet, like Thao Ma's earlier effort, the bombing did little damage and there was no widespread support for the coup.

When word of the bombing reached the embassy, John G. Dean, the chargé d'affaires, rushed to air force headquarters to find Brig. Gen. Sourith Don Sasorith. Dean had shaped the terms of the cease-fire and was currently masterminding the negotiations on creating a

3. Msgs, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 061025Z Feb 73, subj: Immediate Problems Relating to the Ceasefire in Laos, 241230Z Feb 73, subj: Mission Planning in Problems Relating to the Ceasefire in Laos.

4. EOTR, Col Albert J. DeGroote, AIRA Vientiane (Aug 73–May 75), May 5, 1975, pp 13–19; intvw, Lt Col Richard R. Sexton with Col Albert J. DeGroote, Mar 14, 1977.

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[redacted]

provisional government, and the coup threatened to upset his plans. Sourith was not at his headquarters, so Dean drove to the general's home and spotted the RLAF commander cowering under a table, a blue scarf in his pocket—just in case. The chargé literally dragged the protesting Sourith to his feet and insisted he go to the airport to stop the coup. Sourith refused, claiming it was too dangerous. A disgusted Dean left Sourith and went to the airport himself.

By this time, Thao Ma had returned from his bombing mission and was aimlessly buzzing the airport—there being nothing better to do. On one of these passes, his airplane was hit by small-arms fire and crashed near the runway. Thao Ma survived the crash but was pulled from the wreckage and taken to Kouprasith's headquarters where he was summarily shot. Thus ended the feud between the two generals and Thao Ma's last tragic effort to preserve a noncommunist Laos.[5]

With Thao Ma out of the way, the last obstacle to negotiations had been removed and work on building a peacetime air force could proceed. At the time of the cease-fire, the RLAF had 75 T–28s, 26 H–34s, 24 O–1s, 21 C–47s, and 10 AC–47s, apportioned among six squadrons. Embassy plans envisioned a reduction to five squadrons with 25 T–28s,[6] 30 H–34s, 15 O–1s, 10 C–47s, 5 AC–47s, and 10 C–123s. Since the chief peacetime role of the RLAF was to be resupply of government forces rather than combat operations, the transport arm received greater emphasis than the T–28s. The Americans believed that with the additional four H–34s and ten C–123s furnished by Air America the Laotians could meet from 70 percent to 80 percent of their normal peacetime requirements.[7] The smaller force of T–28s could handle minor truce violations without placing too great a strain on Laotian maintenance and supply.

The biggest question mark was whether the Laotians could support and operate even this reduced force without direct American support. The RLAF was already providing its own forward air controllers and handling minor maintenance and base supply. It was deficient, however, in administration, management, logistics, heavy maintenance, command and control, and pilot training. Tackling these deficiencies, the Americans gave more courses in administration, management, and logistics but progress proved agonizingly slow. The Americans also began building a major maintenance facility at Vientiane. They estimated that, after its completion in 1977, the Laotians could handle 70 percent of all maintenance demands. There was very little the U.S. personnel could do about the decentralized control of the RLAF—this was something they just had to live with. One improvement did occur in the high command. Because of his ambivalence (not to say abject cowardice) during the Thao Ma coup, General Sourith was removed as air force commander and put on the general staff as army chief of logistics. Brig. Gen. Bouathong Phothivongsa, another nonflying officer, became RLAF commander. He worked diligently, took flying lessons, and cooperated with Colonel DeGroote in developing the self-sufficiency program.[8] The falloff in combat operations allowed some seasoned T–28 pilots to be taken off the line and used as instructor pilots. These men were adept at imparting the rudiments of flying, though their students lacked some of the polish of Water Pump graduates. For example one of the new graduates on a flight from Udorn to Pakse combined inexperience with a faulty heading indicator, bad weather, and a dose of panic to come up with one of the most gargantuan navigation errors in aviation history. He ended up out of fuel over the South China Sea. Successfully bailing out, he was picked up by the Chinese who ultimately repatriated him.[9]

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5. DeGroote intvw, Mar 14, 1977; Peter Muncie, "The Downfall of General Ma," *The Washington Post*, Aug 22, 1973, p 20.
6. The remaining T–28s would be retained by Water Pump for use as training and replacement aircraft.
7. Available documents are not clear on how the budget would be made up. Apparently this was all the budget would support, although some contract support may have been envisaged if funds could be found.
8. When the government collapsed in 1975, General Bouathong fled to Thailand. He eventually came to the United States under the sponsorship of Colonel DeGroote.
9. Msg, AmEmb Vientiane to SECSTATE, 241230Z Feb 73; DeGroote EOTR, May 5, 1965, pp 19–22; POM for Laos, FY 74–77, CINCPAC, Feb 4, 1973.

[redacted]

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The greatest post-truce success was in the airlift program. Air America turned over its C–123s in March 1973, and the first Laotian pilots graduated in June. Even so, the resupply system itself was a mess. As the air attaché recalled:

> Nobody was handling it! It came under the aegis of USAID but we had Air America doing it, Continental Air Service doing it, anybody with an airplane was doing it. There was no system at all. If you needed a bag of rice delivered to Site 32, just hire a guy to drop it. Problems were solved simply by more money and more contracts. We found that Air America would come in and drop some rice sacks and Continental would come in the same damn place a half hour later and drop off some more. Then suddenly it was dropped in our lap.[10]

Colonel DeGroote assigned the problem to one of his assistants, Capt. James Quinn, who set about at once to bring order out of chaos. Quinn began by flying with the remaining Air America crews to see how they did things. He found out where the sites were, who was in charge, and what they needed. He created a system for funneling all requests into a central point where they could be consolidated and priorities determined. More important, he drew the Laotians into the system, showing them how to process requests and to schedule aircraft for pickup and delivery. Quinn also flew with the RLAF crews, exposing them to the nuts and bolts of aerial resupply. Much to everyone's surprise, the Laotians mastered the system and in a few months were operating on their own with virtually no complaints from the field.

The T–28 operation did not go as well. When the American air operations center personnel were withdrawn, the T–28s simply quit flying. DeGroote remembered:

> When the American supervisors left, everybody just went out and took a three-hour siesta. They figured we would be back in a couple of months—we always had in the past. So things went way down until they couldn't seem to keep an airplane in commission. Finally we went to them and said: "Look, these airplanes are turning to junk. If you don't fly them we are going to take them back and give them to somebody else." Eventually, it dawned on them that we were not coming back and they started cranking themselves up again. They weren't setting any sortie records by a long shot but they were flying the airplanes every day and learning to maintain them.[11]

By the time the provisional government was formed on April 4, 1974, the attachés were reasonably satisfied with the condition of the Laotian armed forces—the most serious weakness being in the top command. Maj. Gen. Bounpone Makthepharak, the commander in chief, was described as "a bad joke—corrupt, stupid, and lazy; his only saving grace is that he never makes a decision and thus never makes a poor one." His deputy, Maj. Gen. Kouprasith Abhay, was likewise tainted with corruption. However, right below them were comparatively honest and capable generals, Brig. Gen. Thao Ly Liddhiluja being a case in point. General Vang Pao, of course, retained his charisma among the Meo. The army itself had fought well in the closing months of the war, and went on holding its own against the Pathet Lao. Still, a visit to an army post could be sobering. Waste and thievery were rampant and equipment maintenance appalling. Fortunately the Pathet Lao were no better off. The lines of once-shiny Soviet equipment now littered their own compounds—mute evidence that the Americans were not alone in their frustration.

In all of this, the RLAF remained the brightest spot. A noticeable upswing in smuggling and pilferage followed the withdrawal of American supervision, but not enough to interfere with combat or resupply operations. In particular, the airlift branch was doing an outstanding job of

10. DeGroote intvw, Mar 14, 1977.
11. *Ibid.*

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picking up where the American contract lines had left off. The T–28s continued to command the respect of the Pathet Lao and were the most frequent target of communist propaganda. If a truce violation seemed to be getting out of hand, the RLAF could always send up half a dozen planes to drop some 500-pound bombs. This usually sufficed to quiet things down.[12]

[redacted] The provisional government itself consisted of equal numbers of communist and noncommunist representatives. Souvanna Phouma stayed as premier with Souphanouvong as vice premier. The Vientiane side also kept the defense and interior ministries while the communists held the portfolios of foreign affairs and education. One key provision of the truce agreement required all decisions to be unanimous. This ensured government paralysis on any major issue, a situation that seemed to favor the status quo. At this point, the Americans were not worried about the North Vietnamese overrunning the country (they appeared to be pulling out most of their troops in accord with the cease-fire), and figured the noncommunist troops could hold their positions against the Pathet Lao.

[redacted] The overriding problem for the U.S. personnel was financial. In lieu of the $60–$80 million the embassy felt was needed to support the armed forces, the fiscal year 1975 budget called for just $40 million. According to the air attaché, this was barely sufficient to furnish uniforms and rice to the friendly troops. Even then, Congress failed to fund the needed money, and the embassy had to fall back on continuing resolution authority.[13] Colonel DeGroote was chosen to explain things to General Vang Pao. After listening intently to the air attaché, Vang Pao was still puzzled. "I don't think I understand you," he told DeGroote, "would you try it again, in French." DeGroote repeated his explanation, this time in French. When he had finished, Vang Pao stood up and said: "Colonel DeGroote, I don't believe you. America is a great country; it would never run its finances that way."[14] But it did.

[redacted] In the teeth of these difficulties, the pro-Western faction managed to hang on, and the Americans sensed there were grounds for cautious optimism. However, the collapse of South Vietnam in April 1975 changed the picture completely. Shortly after the fall of Saigon, the communist staged a series of well-organized demonstrations in Vientiane and most of the other major towns in Laos. The army responded at first; but on May 9, Souvanna announced that Laos would have to accept the "new realities" in Southeast Asia. He soon ordered the army not to return fire, signaling the complete collapse of the Vientiane side. Souvanna stepped down as premier in favor of Souphanouvong, and the principal noncommunist leaders began to leave en masse. Those who remained were quickly rounded up and sent to a "reeducation" center at Samneua.

[redacted] With the communists firmly in control of the government, there was no longer any purpose for the U.S. aid program. When the Pathet Lao began to confiscate all American property, the embassy decided to withdraw all nonessential personnel and the remaining property. Only a chargé d'affaires stayed behind with a staff of twenty people. The attachés went to Udorn leaving one man, an Army major, as military representative. Finally, in July 1976 the Pathet Lao ordered all western military personnel out of the country—British, French, and American. Two decades of American effort in Laos ended eight months later, on March 14, 1977, when the communists arrested King Savang Vatthana and declared Souphanouvong president of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

12. [redacted] *Ibid*; DeGroote EOTR, May 5, 1975, pp 24–31.
13. Authority to continue spending at a previously established level pending approval of current appropriations.
14. [redacted] DeGroote intvw, Mar 14, 1977.

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Glossary (U)

A–1 Skyraider	Single-engine propeller-driven attack aircraft used by the USAF, Navy, and the VNAF. A–IE had two seats; other models had one. Originally Navy AD–series aircraft. (Douglas)[1]
A–4 Skyhawk	Single-engine turbojet attack aircraft. Primarily a Navy and Marine aircraft with a single crewmember. (Douglas)
A–6 Intruder	Twin-engine turbojet, two-place attack aircraft. Used by the Navy and Marines. (Grumman)
A–7 Corsair II	Single-engine tubofan, single-place light attack aircraft. Originally a Navy aircraft, purchased by the Air Force beginning in 1968. (Vought)
A–26 Invader	Twin-engine propeller-driven, WW II-era attack aircraft. Version modified for special warfare missions, including photoreconnaissance, designated A–26K Counter Invader. Three crewmembers. (Douglas)
A–37	Twin-engine turbojet attack aircraft modified from the T–37, has three times the power and two times the gross weight of the T–37. See T–37.
AA	antiaircraft
AAA	antiaircraft artillery
AAR	after action report
AB	air base
ABCCC	airborne battlefield command and control center
Able Mable	Limited reconnaissance by Air Force RF–101s over selected areas of Laos and South Vietnam.
About Face	An operation combining American air power with indigenous forces in Laos against a larger and better equipped enemy (1969).
ABS	air base squadron
AC–47	C–47 transport converted into a gunship by adding side-firing miniguns The AC–47 had several nicknames: Puff the Magic Dragon, Dragon Ship, and Spooky. See C–47.
AC–119	C–119 transport modified into the AC–119G and AC–119K gunships. See C–119.
AC–130	C–130 transport modified into a gunship through the installation of side-firing guns and night-vision devices. See C–130.
ACS	air commando squadron
ACS/	Assistant Chief of Staff for
actg	acting
ACW	air commando wing
AD	air division
AD–6	Early Navy designation for the A–1H. See A–1.
ADC	*Auto Defense de Choc* (Laotian irregular forces)
ADVON	advanced echelon
ADO	*Auto Defense Ordinaire* (Laotian irregular forces)
ADR	air division regulation
AF	Air Force
AFB	Air Force Base
aff	affairs
AFLC	Air Force Logistics Command
AFSC	Air Force Systems Command
AFSHRC	Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center (former name), now the Air Force Historical Research Agency
AFSSO	(S) Air Force special security office(r)
AFXOP	Directorate of Operations, United States Air Force
AGM	air-to-ground missile
AID	Agency for International Development
AIE	air intelligence estimate
AIG	address indicating group
AIRA	air attaché

1. Aircraft manufacturer shown in parenthesis.

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The War in Northern Laos

Air America	Contract airline that flew for the Central Intelligence Agency in Southeast Asia.
ALCC	airlift control center
ALO	air liaison officer
amb	ambassador
AmEmb	American Embassy
AMFPA	Air Materiél Force Pacific Area (USAF)
AN–2 Colt	Soviet-built, single-engine propeller-driven utility transport biplane. Specially designed for operation from small airfields.
analys	analysis
Anniversary Victory	An operation in Laos during late 1964 in which the Méo sought to recapture several Pathet Lao strongpoints east and south of Xieng Khouangville, relieving pressure on Tha Thom.
AOC	air operations center
app	appendix
aprt	airport
Arc Light	Strategic Air Command B–52 strikes in South and North Vietnam and Laos.
ARDF	airborne radio direction finding
AREFS	air refueling squadron
ARMA	Army attaché
ARRS	aerospace rescue and recovery squadron
ARS	air rescue squadron
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASD/ISA	Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs
ASOC	air support operations center
asst	assistant
atch	attachment
Atlanta/Falcon	Teaming in 1969 of Atlanta RF–4s and Falcon F–4s to combine photo and visual reconnaissance into a single mission. The two shared the visual recce task while the F–4 also acted as escort for the unarmed RF–4; later changed to Laredo/Bullpup.
AU	Air University (USAF)
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System
AWS	Air Weather Service (USAF)
B–26 Invader	See A–26 Invader.
B–52 Stratofortress	All-weather, intercontinental, strategic heavy bomber powered by eight turbojet engines. Its range is extended by inflight refueling. Flight crew of six. (Boeing)
B–57 Canberra	Twin-engine turbojet medium bomber developed from English Canberra bomber. Two crewmembers. (Martin)
B–66 Destroyer	Twin-engine turbojet light bomber developed from Navy A–3 Skywarrior. Modified into RB–66 (reconnaissance) and EB–66 (electronic countermeasures) models. Three to seven crewmembers. (Douglas)
Bango/Whiplash	F–4s at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base (Bango) and F–105s at Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base (Whiplash) placed on alert for rapid response to requests from the air attaché at Vientiane for interdiction or support of Royal Laotian Army troops; began in May 1965.
Ban Kao (Old Village)	A FAR operation in March 1966 that sought to seize Ban Mok Plai (Lima Site 193) and to choke off enemy infiltration routes eastward toward Nam Bac.
Barrel Roll	Interdiction and close air support operations in eastern Laos (beginning in December 1964). Operations with this name later reduced to only northern Laos (April 1965).
BDA	bomb damage assessment
Beagle	See IL–28.
BI	Battalion Independent (Laotian), generally *Forces Armées du Royaume* (FAR) or *Forces Armées Neutre* (FAN).
Big Eagle	A–26K night reconnaissance begun in 1966.
Big Eye	EC–121D with radar and communications equipment for early warning and control; began in 1965, redesignated College Eye in 1967. See EC–121D.
Black Spot	Modified C–123s with forward-looking radar, low-light-level television, forward-looking infrared detector, laser range finder, advanced navigation system, weapon-release computer, and CBU dispenser. See C–123.
Black Watch	RB–26 night reconnaissance of Laos that commenced in 1962.
BLU	bomb, live unit

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Glossary

Blue Chip	Seventh Air Force command and control center in Saigon that controlled out-country combat operations.
bn	battalion
Booster Shot	A crash operation to provide economic aid to Laos inaugurated in 1958, the program included civic action projects.
BR	Barrel Roll. See Barrel Roll.
Bullpup	Air-to-surface guided missile, visually guided by launching aircraft command. Used by fighters, light attack aircraft, and helicopters. Intended for close support of ground troops and interdiction and for small targets ashore and afloat.
Butterfly	A forward air controller in Laos until September 1967.
C/	chief of
C–7 Caribou	Twin-engine propeller-driven, all-weather transport, designed for short-takeoff-and-landing in forward battle areas or unimproved strips. Three crewmembers. As Army transports, designated CV–2. (de Havilland)
C–8 Buffalo	Twin-engine turboprop, short-takeoff-and-landing transport. Enlarged version of C–7. Three crewmembers. Army designation CV–7. (de Havilland)
C–47 Skytrain	Twin-engine propeller-driven, WW II-era transport, nicknamed "Gooney Bird." Modified into AC–47 (gunship), EC–47 (electronic countermeasures), and RC–47 (reconnaissance). Two to seven crewmembers: used by USAF and VNAF. (Douglas)
C–54 Skymaster	Four-engine propeller-driven, WW II-era transport adapted from commercial DC–4. (Douglas)
C–118 Liftmaster	Four-engine propeller-driven, long-range transport; military version of commercial DC–6. Five crewmembers (Douglas)
C–119 Flying Boxcar	Twin-engine, twin-boom, high-wing, propeller-driven transport used by the USAF and VNAF. Modified versions included the AC–119G Shadow and AC–119K Stinger gunships. The K model had auxiliary jets mounted outboard of the piston engines. Four crewmembers in transport; eight to ten in gunships. (Fairchild)
C–123 Provider	Twin-engine propeller-driven, high-wing transport used by the USAF and VNAF. Four crewmembers. C–123K has two auxiliary turbojet engines. UC–123 was modified for Ranch Hand defoliation missions. (Fairchild)
C–124 Globemaster	Four-engine propeller-driven, large transport. Five crewmembers. (Douglas)
C–130 Hercules	Four-engine turboprop, medium-range, high-wing transport. Variants include AC–130 gunship and EC–130 command/electronic warfare aircraft. Four crewmembers; AC–130 had fourteen. (Lockheed)
C–133 Cargomaster	Four-engine turboprop, high-wing, long-range transport. Four to ten crewmembers. (Douglas)
C–141 Starlifter	Four-engine turbofan, high-wing, long-range transport, first all-jet strategic transport. Eight crewmembers. (Lockheed)
CAP	combat air patrol
CAS	close air support; Controlled American Source
CBU	Cluster bomb unit; antipersonnel weapon consisting of a dispenser containing smaller explosive devices (bomblets) that contained steel spheres.
CDIN	Committee for the Defense of National Interests (*Comite pour la Defense des Interets Nationaux*)
CEG	combat engineering group
CG	commanding general
ch	chief
Ch/	Chief of
CH–3 Sea King	Twin-turbine passenger/cargo helicopter with single five-blade main rotor, capable of operating from land or water. Three to four crewmembers. HH–3 variant modified for rescue operations (Sikorsky)
chasseurs	Lao infantry companies made part of the French colonial army.
CHECO	Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Counterinsurgency Operations (1962); Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Combat Operations (1965); Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (1970)
CHJUSMAGTHAI	Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand
CHMAAG	Chief, Military Assistance Advisory Group
CHPEO	Chief, Programs Evaluation Office
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency

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CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific Command
CINCPACAF	Commander in Chief, Pacific Air Forces
CINCPACFLT	Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet
CINCUSARPAC	Commander in Chief, United States Army, Pacific
cmdr	commander
CNA	Center for Naval Analysis
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations (US)
COC	combined operations center; combat operations center
COIN	counterinsurgency
College Eye	EC–121D airborne early warning/ground controlled intercept/Mig warning and control aircraft staging out of Korat RTAFB.
Combat Skyspot	MSQ–77 and SST–181 radar-controlled bombing system.
comdr	commander
comm	communication(s)
Commando Club	Code name of the entire project to install a TSQ–81 radar at Phou Phathi, Laos, in 1967.
Commando Hunt	Air interdiction of the overland flow I, III, V of supplies from North Vietnam to Viet Cong and North Vietnam forces in South Vietnam and Cambodia.
Commando Sabre	Operations begun in June 1967 to demonstrate the feasibility of using jet aircraft in the FAC role in high-threat areas where O–1s and O–2s were vulnerable.
COMUSMACV	Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
Corona Harvest	A USAF project to collect documents on the SEA conflict for historical purposes.
Counterpunch	An operation from November 26, 1970, to January 5, 1971, entailing a large-scale raid on Ban Ban, Laos, to pinch off the main supply corridor and possibly lure the communists from the Plain of Jars.
Covey	Call sign of the FACs of the 20th TASS operating in North Vietnam and Laos
CRC	control and reporting center
Cricket	Special air and air-ground program in central Laos with many targets selected by CIA-organized tribal and roadwatch teams.
C/S	chief of staff
CSA	Chief of Staff, United States Army
CSAF	Chief of Staff, United States Air Force
CSG	combat support group
CTG	carrier task group
curr	current
CV–2 Caribou	Army designation of C–7. See C–7.
CY	calendar year
DA	Department of the Army
DABIN	Data Base Inventory
DAF	Department of the Air Force
DAS	direct air support
DASC	direct air support center
DBA	designated battlefield area
DCS/	Deputy Chief of Staff for
DDIIR	Department of Defense Intelligence Information Report
Demilitarized Zone	The neutral zone separating the two Vietnams, consisting of demilitarized zones of not more than five kilometers on either side of the demarcation line, the Ben Hai River; located at about the 17th parallel.
dep	deputy
DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI	Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand
DEPCOMUSMACTHAI	Deputy Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Thailand
DEPSECDEF	Deputy Secretary of Defense
dept	department
Desert Rat	An operation in February-March 1971 in whcih four guerrilla battalions sought to cut Route 23 north of Saravane, Laos, and then link up with the South Vietnamese. See Lam Son 719.
De Soto	United States offshore intelligence collection.
det	detachment
DI	director of intelligence; directorate of intelligence
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency

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Glossary

Dir/ div	Director of; Directorate of division
Dixie Station	The location of U.S. naval forces in the South China Sea with strike responsibility for South Vietnam.
DJSM	Director Joint Staff Memorandum
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DNC	Directorate of National Coordination, Royal Laotian Government
doc	document
DOD	Department of Defense
Dog Patch	Call sign of a specially configured RC–47 acting as an airborne battlefield command and control center in Barrel Roll.
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
Duck Soup	Airborne alert aircraft (2d Air Division, June 4–10, 1965) intended to intercept enemy resupply aircraft in northeast Laos.
EB–66	B–66 modified to a special electronic configuration. See B–66.
EC–47	A C–47 with radio direction finding equipment. First designated RC–47. See C–47.
EC–121D Constellation	A C–121 (four-engine propeller-driven transport built by Lockheed) modified as a special search aircraft with bottom and top radar. Sixteen crewmembers. Official nickname is Warning Star; see Big Eye.
EC–130E	C–130E with special electronic configuration. See C–130.
ECCOIL	Eastern Construction Company in Laos
El Paso	A major ground campaign in III Corps during June-July 1966 by the 1st Infantry Division and the III Corps ARVN forces.
EM	enlisted man, enlisted men
encl	enclosure
EOTR	End of Tour Report
Erawan	Code name for program in 1959 whereby U.S. Special Forces trained a few Lao in unconventional warfare and antiguerrilla tactics.
exec	executive
F–4 Phantom II	Twin-engine turbojet, all-weather, supersonic tactical fighter-bomber developed from Navy's F–4B (F–4C first USAF model). F–4E had an internal 20–mm Gatling gun; all previous models carried either missiles only or missiles and an external gun pod. Used by USAF, USN, and USMC. Two crewmembers. (McDonnell Douglas)
F–5 Freedom Fighter	Twin-engine turbojet, supersonic, light tactical fighter. Nicknamed Skoshi (little) Tiger in Vietnam. F–5A has one crewmember, F–5B two crewmembers. Used by USAF and VNAF. (Northrup)
F–8 Crusader	Single-engine turbojet, supersonic day jet fighter. Used by USN and USMC. One crewmember. (Vought)
F8F Bearcat	Prop-driven, single-engine, WW II-era Navy fighter. Maximum speed at sea level, 425 miles-per-hour; service ceiling, 42,300 feet; normal range with drop tank, 1,650 miles. Fitted with four 12.7 machineguns or four 20-mm cannon; could carry 2,000 pounds of bombs or four 5-inch rockets under wings. One crewmember. (Grumman)
F–100 Super Sabre	Single-engine turbojet, supersonic fighter with a low, thin, swept wing. The F–100F used as a jet FAC had two crew members; other models had one. (North American)
F–105 Thunderchief	Single-engine turbojet, all weather, supersonic fighter-bomber. The two-place F–105G was an F–105F modified for the "Wild Weasel" role for destroying surface-to-air missile sites. (Republic)
F–102 Delta Dagger	Single-engine turbojet, supersonic, delta-wing fighter-interceptor. TF–102 had two crewmembers; others had one. (Convair)
F–104 Starfighter	Single-engine turbojet, supersonic, light-weight fighter. One crew member in A and C models; two in B and D models (trainers). (Lockheed)
F–111	Twin-engine turbofan, all weather, supersonic, variable-geometry wing fighter-bomber. Most sophisticated USAF aircraft in Vietnam; advanced electronics allowed missions in all conditions. Two crewmembers. (General Dynamics)
FAC	forward air controller
FAG	forward air guide
FAL	*Forces Armées de Laos* (Lao army), succeeded by FAR.
FAN	*Forces Armées Neutre* (Lao neutralist army)

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FAR	*Forces Armées du Royaume* (Royal Laotian Army), a rightwing component that succeeded the FAL.
Farm Gate	The detachment of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron deployed to Bien Hoa Air Base, Vietnam with C 47s and T–28s in November 1961.
FE	Far East; far eastern
Field Goal	United States Air Force RT–33 photo jet reconnaissance in Laos (1961). Supplanted by Able Mable.
FIR	field information report
Fireflies	(S) Nickname of ex-Royal Thai Air Force pilots who flew T–28s based at Udorn RTAFB. Later known as Thai B pilots.
FIS	fighter interceptor squadron
Flaming Dart	Retaliatory strikes against North Vietnam in early 1965, superseded in March 1965 by Rolling Thunder.
FM	frequency modulation
FMM	French Military Mission
FOV	Field Office Vientiane
fr	from
frag	To issue a fragmentary operation order covering details of a single mission.
fragmentary	The daily supplement to a standard operation operation order governing the conduct order of the air war in Southeast Asia. It contained mission number and function, type of ordnance, time on target, and other instructions.
FSB	fire support base
FSC	fighter squadron commando
FTT	field training team
FWAF	free world assistance force
FW	fighter wing
FY	fiscal year
GCI	ground-controlled intercept
Geneva accords	The agreements of the Geneva Conference of 1954 that led to the withdrawal of French forces from Vietnam and the division of the country into North and South Vietnam; specified Laos as a neutral country and restricted number and type of outside military forces in Laos.
GM	Groupe Mobile, a French unit designation used by the Laotian army. Consisted normally of three infantry battalions and one 105-mm howitzer.
gp	group
Gooney Bird	Unofficial nickname of the C–47 aircraft.
GS	General Staff
gunship	Any of several modified USAF fixed-wing transport aircraft equipped with side-firing weapons and night-vision devices. (Term also applies to U.S. Army and Marine helicopters equipped with weapons.)
H–19 Chickasaw	Single-engine (piston) transport helicopter with a single three-blade main rotor. Two crewmembers. (Sikorsky)
H–34 Choctaw	Single-engine (piston) transport helicopter with a four-blade main rotor. Two crewmembers. (Sikorsky)
hangar queen	An aircraft deadlined for some time due to a shortage of parts.
hard target	A preplanned target such as a truck park, bridge, bivouac and storage area, or chokepoint.
HC–47	C–47 equipped for search and rescue operations with twice the fuel load, stronger landing gear, and jet-assisted takeoff. See C–47.
HC–54	C–54 modified for search and rescue missions. See C–54.
HC–130	C–130E modified for search and rescue missions. See C–130.
HE	high explosive
HH–3 Jolly Green Giant	Search and rescue version of the CH–3, modified with armor plating, jettisonable external fuel tanks, refueling probe, and two 7.62–mm guns. See CH–3.
HH–43 Huskie	Single-engine (turbine) helicopter designed for crash-rescue operations with two contra-rotating, two-blade rotors set at opposing angles above fuselage. F model has armor plating around engine, crew area, and cargo compartment. Two crewmembers. (Kaman)
high-drag bomb	A weapon fitted with extra fins to slow its speed and increase the time of fall.
hist	history

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Glossary

Ho Chi Minh Trail	The NVA logistic supply route of roads and trails through the passes from NVN into Laos and down the eastern side of Laos into South Vietnam and Cambodia.
HS	helicopter squadron
HU–16 Albatross	Twin-engine propeller-driven, amphibious, high-wing, search and rescue aircraft with all-metal hull and wing floats. Four crew members. (Grumman)
Huey	nickname for the UH–1 helicopter
ICC	International Control Commission
IFR	instrument flight rules
Igloo White	Air-supported antivehicular and antipersonnel system using acoustic and seismic sensors.
IL	Ilyushin, used in the designation of Russian aircraft designed by General Sergei V. Ilyushin.
incendejel	napalm
intel	intelligence
intvw	interview
IR	infrared
IRAN	inspection and repair as necessary
iron bomb	An unguided, high-explosive bomb
Iron Hand	Specially equipped F–105F aircraft that flew suppression against surface-to-air missiles and radar-controlled antiaircraft artillery.
JANAF	Joint Army-Navy-Air Force
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JCSM	Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum
JOC	joint operations center
JP–4	Jet petroleum, a liquid aircraft fuel whose chief ingredient is kerosene.
J-Staff	Joint Staff. Used in numerical combinations such as J-1 (Personnel), J-2 (Intelligence), J-3 (Operations), J-4 (Logistics), J-5 (Plans), and J-6 (Communications and Electronics).
JTF	joint task force
Junction City	The massive two and one-half month (February-April 1967) sweep of War Zone C aimed at opening the area for clearing operations that would eliminate this major enemy sanctuary. The plan was to root out the COSVN and cripple the 9th VC Division.
Jungle Jim	The 4400th Combat Crew training squadron and subsequent USAF air commando activity at Eglin AFB, Florida.
JUSMAG	Joint United States Military Advisory Group
JUSMAGTHAI	Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand
karst	An irregular limestone region with jagged ridges, sinks, underground streams, and caverns.
KBA	killed by air
KC–135 Stratotanker	Long-range, high-performance tanker powered by four turbojet engines. Has a flying boom for high-speed, high-altitude, aerial refueling of bombers and fighters. Can be used as a cargo and/ or troop transport, carrying up to eighty troops. Four crewmembers. (Boeing)
KIA	killed in action
kip	The basic monetary unit of Laos from 1955.
km	kilometer
Knight Watch	An operation in which A–1s directed North Vietnam strike packages against targets in Barrel Roll when weather precluded striking their primary targets in North Vietnam.
L–19	Previous designation for the O–1. See O–1.
LAAF	Laotian Army Air Force
Lam Son 719	South Vietnamese incursion into Laos during February and March 1971. First major operation of its kind—large South Vietnamese ground forces operating independently of U.S. Army ground advisors but with almost complete dependence on U.S. air support.
Laredo/Bullwhip	See Atlanta/Falcon.
L'Armee Clandestine	"Clandestine Army," the name applied to trained Meo troops.

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laser	light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation
lima site	Aircraft landing site (dirt strip) in Laos used as resupply point.
Linebacker I	An operation authorized by President Nixon after he suspended peace talks in Paris on May 8, 1972. For the first time, the United States imposed a naval blockade and mined the waters of Haiphong and other North Vietnamese ports. Simultaneously, the President authorized a renewal of air strikes throughout North Vietnam above the 20th parallel. Linebacker I ended on October 22, 1972.
LOC(s)	line(s) of communication
Lonesome Tiger	Forward-looking infrared detection system in the 1966 A–26 aircraft flight test.
loran	Long-range electronic navigation system that uses a time divergence of pulse-type transmissions from two or more fixed stations. From (LO)ng (RA)nge (N)avigation.
loran D	Used a computer aboard an aircraft to measure the time difference between signals received from two pair of radio stations. Maps using loran D overlay translated geographic coordinates into loran coordinates. This allowed bombing of targets regardless of weather.
LS	lima site
LST	landing ship, tank
LTAG	Lao Training Advisory Group
lt gap	loran targeting, grid annotated photography
ltr	letter
Lucky Dragon	Reconnaissance of the Laos and South and North Vietnam borders and selected target areas by U–2 aircraft of the Strategic Air Command. Began in February 1964.
M–16	A 5.56–mm, magazine-fed, gas-operated, air-cooled, shoulder weapon designed for either semiautomatic or automatic fire.
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MAC	Military Airlift Command
MACLAOS	Military Assistance Coordinator, Laos
MACTHAI	Military Assistance Command, Thailand
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAF	Marine amphibious force
MAP	Military Assistance Program
MASF	Military Assistance Service Funded
MATS	Military Air Transport Service
MAW	Marine aircraft wing
mbl	mobile
memo	memorandum
MiG	Popular designation for fighter aircraft designed and developed by the Russian Mikoyan and Gurevich design bureau.
mil	military
Millpond	Materiél, financial, and advisory/combat assistance to Laos, approved by President Kennedy in March 1961.
minigun	A 7.62-mm mutibarrel weapon firing 6,000 rounds per minute with a muzzle velocity of 2,750 feet-per-second.
mm	millimeter
monsoon	A seasonal wind in Southeast Asia that blows from the southwest during April to October and from the northeast during the rest of the year.
Montagnard	Mountain tribesmen of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia who had a history of antipathy toward the Vietnamese.
Morane-500	Prop-driven, single-engine, high-wing, Cricket liaison aircraft. Two crewmembers. (Morane Saulnier)
MR	memorandum for record; military region
msg	message
mtg	meeting
MTT	mobile training team
Mule Train	The nickname of the initial USAF C–123 detachment in Vietnam.
Muscle Shoals	Air-supported antivehicular and antipersonnel system using acoustic and seismic sensors; started in 1966 and renamed Igloo White in July 1968.
Nail	Call sign for FAC aircraft operating in Laos from the 23d TASS at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB.

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nape	napalm
nat	national
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	noncommissioned officer
n.d.	no date
Niagara	USAF participation in the battle for Khe Sanh in January-March 1968.
Nimrod	Call sign for A–26s of the 56th Air Commando Wing, Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, operating in Laos.
NLHX	Neo Lao Hak Xat, Laotian Patriotic Front (communist Pathet Lao political party in Laos).
NM	nautical mile
NMCC	National Military Command Center
NORM	not operationally ready, maintenance
NORS	not operationally ready, supply
NSA	National Security Agency
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
NVN	North Vietnam
O–1 Bird Dog	Single-engine propeller-driven, high-wing, light observation aircraft. One or two crewmembers. Formerly designated L–19. (Cessna)
O–2 Super Skymaster	Twin-engine (one push, one pull), propeller-driven, twin-boom light observation aircraft. One or two crewmembers. (Cessna)
ofc	office
Ofc/	Office of
off	officer
Off Balance	An operation in 1969 to retake Muong Soui, Laos, from the communists.
One Buck	Tactical Air Command composite air strike force deployment to Southeast Asia in August 1964 in response to the Gulf of Tonkin attack.
OPlan	Operation Plan
OpOrd	Operation Order
ops	operations
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
OV–1 Mohawk	Twin-engine turboprop, surveillance (day and night) airplane with visual observation and photographic capabilities. Two crew members. (Grumman)
OV–10 Bronco	Twin-engine, twin-boom, light-weight, armed reconnaissance aircraft. More versatile than the O–1 or O–2, used in Vietnam after 1968. Two crewmembers. (North American)
PACAF	Pacific Air Forces
PACFLT	Pacific Fleet
PACOM	Pacific Command
PAF	Pacific Air Force (1954–56)
Palace Dog	Project under which Air Force personnel were sent on temporary duty to staff the air operations centers in Laos.
PARU	(S) Police Aerial Resupply Unit, actually a Thai Special Forces unit.
Pathet Lao	Laotian Communist force or person.
Pathfinder	An aircraft with special navigation equipment (radar, loran) that guides other aircraft on a mission.
Patricia Lynn	RB–57 reconnaissance aircraft.
Pave Way	Guidance systems for bombs: Paveway I—laser, II—electro-optical III—infrared. Also used to describe the aircraft delivering the bombs.
PDJ	Plaines des Jars (Plain of Jars). A militarily strategic area northeast of Vientiane in Laos.
PEO	Programs Evaluation Office
perm	permanent
Pierce Arrow	Tactical Air Command composite air strike force made up of fighter, reconnaissance, and airlift units, intended to bolster Pacific Air Forces tactical forces in the Far East in August 1964. Later called One Buck.

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Pig Fat	A Meo operation in northern Laos during late November and December 1968, supported by allied air power.
Pipestem	Limited reconnaissance in October 1981 by four Air Force RF–101s over selected areas of Laos and South Vietnam. Replaced in early November by Able Mable.
PL	Pathet Lao
POL	petroleum, oil, and lubricants
Pony Express	Support provided by Air Force helicopter units to tribal intelligence gathering and targeting operations in southern Laos and North Vietnam.
PPC	Photographic processing cell; a facility, generally mobile, equipped for the processing, printing, and interpretation of reconnaissance sensor products and other production normally related to the reconnaissance intelligence function.
Prairie Fire	Formerly Shining Brass. Consisted of air-supported ground reconnaissance teams sent into enemy territory to select targets for air strikes and to make poststrike assessments of damage.
Prasane	An operation in 1966 to clear the Pathet Lao from Nam Bac and the Ou River Valley in Luang Prabang Province, Laos.
pres	president
prgm	program
proj	project
psp	pieced steel planking
psyop(s)	psychological operation(s)
psywar	psychological warfare
PT (boat)	patrol torpedo boat
PT–76	Soviet amphibious light tank with 76–mm gun.
R&D	research and development
R&R	rest and recuperation.
RB–26	B–26 modified for reconnaissance. See A–26.
RB–57	B–57 modified for reconnaissance. See B–57.
RB–66	B–66 modified for reconnaissance. See B–66.
RC–47	C–47 transport modified for reconnaissance. See C–47.
RF–4	F–4 modified for photographic and/or electronic reconnaissance missions. See F–4.
RF–8	F–8 modified for reconnaissance missions. See F–8.
RF–101 Voodoo	Reconnaissance version of the F–101. A twin-engine turbojet aircraft, the first supersonic reconnaissance aircraft of the USAF. one crewmember. (McDonnell)
Rain Dance	Air operation against communist transshipment points, base camps, storage areas, and headquarters in formerly restricted areas on the eastern edge of the Plain of Jars (1969).
Raven	Forward air controllers in Laos (name changed from Butterfly in September 1967).
rcrd	record
RCS	reconnaissance squadron
ret	retired
RLA	Royal Laotian Army
RLAF	Royal Laotian Air Force
RLG	Royal Laotian Government
RLGAF	Royal Laotian Government Air Force
RO	requirements office
ROK	Republic of Korea
Rolling Thunder	Air strikes against lines of communication and other targets in North Vietnam (March 1965–October 1968).
Route Packages	Numbered geographic areas (I through V, VIA, VIB) in North Vietnam, designated by CINCPAC to permit the assignment of Rolling Thunder responsibilities to CINCPACAF, CINCPACFLT, and COMUSMACV.
RPL	Laotian People's Rally, a party formed in 1958 when several conservative groups merged with Souvanna Phouma's constituents. Goal of the new party, led by Souvanna, was to unite the national forces to fight communism and subversion.
rpt	report
rqmts	requirements
RT–28	T–28 configured for reconnaissance. See T–28.
RT–33 Shooting Star	The reconnaissance configuration of the T–33, a single-engine, two-place, jet trainer version of the F–80. (Lockheed)
RTA	Royal Thailand Army

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Glossary

RTAF	Royal Thai Air Force
RTAFB	Royal Thai Air Force Base
RTG	Royal Thailand Government
RTS	reconnaissance technical squadron
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
S–2 Tracker	Twin-engine propeller-driven, carrier-based, search and attack, antisubmarine aircraft. (Grumman)
SAC	Strategic Air Command
SAF	Secretary of the Air Force
sappers	Individuals who conduct attacks and sabotage using mines, satchel charges, and/or other demolition devices.
SAR	search and rescue
SAW	special air warfare
SAWC	Special Air Warfare Center (USAF)
Sayasila	An all-Laotian operation in 1971 to recover the Bolovens Plateau.
SC–47	C–47 transport especially equipped for search and rescue missions, and with twice the normal fuel load, stronger landing gear, and jet-assisted takeoff. Later designated HC–47.
scty	security
SEA	Southeast Asia
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SEACOORD	Coordinating Committee for United States Missions Southeast Asia
SECDEF	Secretary of Defense
SECSTATE	Secretary of State
secy	secretary
Seed Joy	A program to modify the Bullpup for flak suppression.
Sentinel Lock	A program that produced photomaps referenced to loran beacon locations. Similar to lt gap (loran-targeting, grid annotated photography). Aircraft's computer recorded loran coordinates at the point beneath the aircraft at the instant the photo was taken. From this data a photomap was made with a grid overlay giving exact coordinates of every position on the map.
sess	session
Shadow	Call sign of the C–119G gunships.
Shed Light	A USAF program to improve night attack/interdiction capability.
sheep-dip	(S) Give a military member civilian clothes, civilian identification, and a suitable cover story.
Shining Brass	Shining Brass United States-led South Vietnamese probes into the Ho Chi Minh Trail with Army and Air Force helicopter and aircraft support (renamed Prairie Fire on March 1, 1967). Began September 15, 1965.
short rounds	The inadvertent or accidental delivery of ordnance with resultant injury or death to friendly forces or noncombatants. The term originally described rounds or bombs that fell short of the target.
[redacted]	[redacted]
SITREP	commander's situation report
Skyspot	See Combat Skyspot.
SL	Steel Tiger
SLAR	Side-looking airborne radar; views at right angles to the axis of the aircraft, producing a presentation of terrain or moving targets.
slicks	low-drag weapons; unarmed troop-carrying helicopters
smart bomb	A bomb with a system allowing internal or external guidance after release.
Snake Eye	A high-explosive bomb with three retarders similar to a four-armed umbrella, thus permitting low-altitude release and enhancing accuracy.
Snare Drum	Air attacks to catch the enemy by surprise, just before dawn and after dusk. A single high-speed pass was made by sixteen to twenty-four F–4s. To produce the most lethal concentration over a wide area, a combination of CBU–24 antipersonnel bombs and 500-pound general purpose bombs were used.
SOIC	sector operational intelligence center
soft target	A target usually acquired by aerial visual or photo reconnaissance in conjunction with ground operations. Suitable for a onetime strike.

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SOS	special operations squadron
SOW	special operations wing
sp	special
Special Forces	Military personnel with cross-training in basic and specialized military skills, organized into small multiple-purpose detachments with the mission to train, organize, supply, direct, and control other forces in guerilla warfare and counterinsurgency operations and conduct unconventional warfare operations.
spt	support
sqdn	squadron
Steel Tiger	Air Force/Navy interdiction in southern Laos on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, beginning April 3, 1965, after which Barrel Roll was confined to northern Laos.
STOL	Short-takeoff-and-landing
Stranglehold	Scaled-down version of Rain Dance, designed to cut Route 7 in Laos (1969).
STRICOM	Strike Command
subj	subject
sum	summary
sup	supplement
SVN	South Vietnam
T–6 Harvard or Texan	Prop-driven, single-engine, two-seat, low-wing, trainer airplane.
T–28 Nomad	Single-engine propeller-driven, 1950-era trainer. The T–28s used in Vietnam had been extensively modified for use as counterinsurgency aircraft. Used by USAF and VNAF; two crewmembers. (North American)
T–37	Twin-engine turbojet trainer with side-by-side seating for instructor and student. The A–37 was a highly modified version of this aircraft. (Cessna)
TAC	Tactical Air Command
tac	tactical
tacan	tactical air navigation, a radio air navigation system
TACC	tactical air control center
TACS	tactical air control system
Tally Ho	An intensified interdiction campaign in southern route package 1.
targets of opportunity	Perishable or fleeting targets like trucks, boats, or personnel.
TAS	tactical airlift squadron
TASG	tactical air support group
TASS	tactical air support squadron
TBS	tactical bomb squadron
TCS	troop carrier squadron
TCW	troop carrier wing
tech	technical
Tet	The Lunar New Year holiday celebrated in Vietnam and other Asian countries during the first seven days of the first month of the lunar calendar, occurs between January 21 and February 19.
TEWS	tactical electronic warfare squadron
TF	task force
TFS	tactical fighter squadron
TFW	tactical fighter wing
TG	task group
34–A operations	Operations carried out covertly north of the demilitarized zone.
Tiger Hound	Nickname of a special Air Force, Navy, Marine, and Army task force that began interdicting southeastern Laos on December 5, 1965.
Tiger target list	Target list prepared by Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force
TOT	time over target; time on target
Triangle	An operation featuring a combined FAR/ neutralist/Meo assault on an enemy pocket at Sala Phou Khoun, Laos, that threatened Route 13 and the rear of General Kong Le's Muoung Soui headquarters (1964).
TRS	tactical reconnaissance squadron
TRW	tactical reconnaissance wing
Turnpike	An interdiction operation between April 19 and October 31, 1968. B–52s and tactical fighters, using laser-guided bombs for the first time, waged an around-the-clock campaign against all known truck parks and storage areas along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and in Route Package I in southern North Vietnam.

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U–2	Single-engine, high-altitude, long-range, turbojet reconnaissance aircraft with long, wide, straight wings and a glider-like appearance and characteristics. One crewmember. (Lockheed)
U–6 Beaver	Single-engine propeller-driven utility aircraft. One crewmember, five passengers. (de Havilland)
U–10 Super Courier	Single-engine propeller-driven, STOL aircraft. Two crewmembers, two passengers. (Helio)
U–17 Skywagon	Single-engine propeller-driven utility aircraft. One crewmember, five passengers. (Cessna)
UC–123	C–123 transport modified for spraying. See C–123 and Ranch Hand.
UH–1	Iroquois Single-engine (turbine) general purpose helicopter with a single two-blade main rotor. Used by U.S. Army. Two crewmembers, five to eleven passengers. (Bell)
UHF	ultra high frequency
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States (of America)
USA	United States Army
USAF	United States Air Force
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USARMA	United States Army attaché
USARV	United States Army, Vietnam
USIA	United States Information Agency
USIS	United States Information Service
USMACTHAI	United States Military Assistance Command Thailand
USMACV	United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam
USMC	United States Marine Corps
USN	United States Navy
USOM	United States Operations Mission
USSTRICOM	United States Strike Command
VC	Viet Cong
VC–47	The C–47 equipped for administrative operations. See C–47.
VHF	very high frequency
Viet Cong	Informal name for South Vietnamese Communist forces, ranged from guerrillas to well trained and equipped main forces.
Viet Minh	Short name for a Vietnamese independence group (*Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*—League for the Independence of Viet Nam) formed in 1941 that led the struggle for the independence of Vietnam from the French and fought the French in the Indochina War. Viet Minh leaders were absorbed into the Vietnamese Communist Party, the dominant force in North Vietnam, and elements merged with the Viet Cong in South Vietnam.
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force
vol	volume
VR	visual reconnaissance
VTOL	vertical takeoff and landing
Water Pump	Nickname for Detachment 6, 1st Air Commando Wing, that deployed to Udorn RTAFB in April 1964 to training and provide logistic support for Thai and Laotian air force personnel.
West Wind	Seventh Air Force operations against the North Vietnamese logistic buildup in Laos (1969).
wg	wing
White Star	Mobile training teams consisting of Special Forces personnel from Okinawa. They acted as cadres for General Phoumi's FAR troops but were most adept in working with General Vang Pao's Meo guerrilla fighters.
WIA	wounded in action
Wild Weasel	The name applied to specially configured multiplace fighter aircraft and aircrews used to hunt and kill enemy-controlled surface-to-air missile sites.
WIS	Weekly Intelligence Summary (Seventh AF)
WRS	weather reconnaissance squadron

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Yankee Station	The location of U.S. naval forces in the Gulf of Tonkin that had strike responsibility for North Vietnam.
Yankee Team	A USAF and USN tactical recon program that began in northern and southern Laos on May 19, 1964.
Zulu (or Z)	Zulu Time (Greenwich Mean Time)

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Bibliographic Note (U)

(U) Documents addressed to or emanating from the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, Laos, served as the chief source for this volume. Included are messages to and from the ambassador, military attaches, Central Intelligence Agency, requirements office, and others. The CINCPAC communications center recorded these messages on microfilm and deposited them with the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C. Since all telecommunications lines between Southeast Asia and the continental United States passed through the CINCPAC communications center, the collection contains virtually all telegraphic messages to and from the theater, including messages from the Pacific Command; Pacific Air Forces; Pacific Fleet; United States Army, Pacific; Military Assistance Command, Vietnam; Military Assistance Command, Thailand; Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand (and its predecessor, Programs Evaluation Office/Military Assistance Advisory Group, Laos); 2d Air Division; Seventh Air Force; Thirteenth Air Force; Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force (and its forerunner, 2d Air Division/Thirteenth Air Force); U.S. Support Activities Group; Joint Chiefs of Staff; Defense Intelligence Agency; Central Intelligence Agency; and the Department of State and its embassies.

(U) The second major source was the Project CHECO[1] microfilm collection at the Air Force Historical Research Agency,[2] Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. During the war, Project CHECO microfilmed the records of most all USAF activities in Southeast Asia. Among them are the air attache offices, Seventh Air Force, Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force, and the various Air Force units assigned to Southeast Asia. The collection is by no means complete because many documents were destroyed before CHECO personnel had a chance to record them. Even so, the records give valuable insights into day-to-day operations of these activities. Besides collecting and recording documents, Project CHECO prepared a number of specialized studies on aspects of the war. These are cataloged in Edward T. Russell, *Research Guide to the Published Project CHECO Reports, 1964-1976* (Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center, 1976).

(U) The Air University's Project Corona Harvest gathered a rich lode of documents, collected End of Tour Reports from nearly all unit commanders in Southeast Asia, and conducted interviews with key personnel who served in the theater. A listing and abstract of each interview are in the *U.S. Air Force Oral History Catalog*, issued by the Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center in 1977. Like Project CHECO, Corona Harvest published numerous special reports. One particularly valuable to this work is Pacific Air Forces Activity Input to Project Corona Harvest, *Out-Country Strike Operations in Southeast Asia*, covering December 1964 to December 1969. A complete index to CHECO and Corona Harvest material, and many other sources as well, can be found in the computerized data base system maintained by the Air Force Historical Research Agency.

(U) Other document collections consulted were those of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Air Staff agencies at the Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Md.; Commander in Chief,

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1. (U) Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Counterinsurgency Operations (1962); Contemporary Historical Evaluation of Combat Operations (1965); Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (1970)

2. (U) The USAF Historical Research Agency has gone through a number of name changes. Established in 1942 as the AAF Historical Division, it was redesignated Air Historical Group in 1948, USAF Historical Division in 1949, Historical Research Division in 1969, Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center in 1972, USAF Historical Research Center in 1983, and USAF Historical Research Agency in 1992.

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Pacific Command, at the Federal Records Center, Mechanicsburg, Pa.; Seventh Air Force and Pacific Air Forces at the Air Force Historical Research Agency; and the files of the Department of State, Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Central Intelligence Agency. In addition, the U.S. Special Operations School (formerly the Special Air Warfare Center), Hurlburt Field, Fla., keeps an extensive library on air commando activities in Southeast Asia. And the Center for Air Force History, Bolling Air Force Base, Distric of Columbia, has a large collection of personal papers and memorabilia of major USAF personalities.

(U) The Defense Intelligence Agency's *Cold War (Counterinsurgency) Analysis, Laos* (1965) supplies a useful summary of the war up to that year. The DIA/JCS quarterly *Southeast Asia Military Fact Book* furnishes data on the force structure and order of battle for the countries in Southeast Asia. A running account of JCS actions regarding Laos is in *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1960-1968* (JCS Historical Division, 1970). Convenient guides to researching JCS files are *Chronology of JCS Recommendations Concerning Military Involvment in Laos* (JCS, 1972) and *JCS Chronology* (JCS, 1973).

(U) Semiannual histories of Air Staff directorates present a picture of the war as seen from Washington and put it within the framework of worldwide USAF activities. The Air Force's *Journal of Mutual Security* (renamed *Journal of Military Assistance* in September 1961) tells in words and statistics the story of military aid to the Royal Laotian Air Force. The USAF Management Summary, Southeast Asia, provides data on Air Force operations as does the USAF Trends, Indicators, and Analyses.

(U) Indispensable to any study of the war in Laos are the command histories of Strategic Air Command; Pacific Command; Pacific Air Forces; Military Assistance Command, Vietnam; Military Assistance Command, Thailand; 2d Air Division; Seventh Air Force; U.S. Support Activities Group; Thirteenth Air Force; and Seventh Air Force/Thirteenth Air Force. Unit histories are a mixed bag, but the best of them provide penetrating insights into how the war was actually fought.

(U) Historical summaries of the Deputy Chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand, are essentially extended End of Tour Reports affording an overall account of the Military Assistance Program from 1962 on. The early period is depicted in the Final Report of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group, Laos, November 6, 1962; study, PEO, Missions and Functions of Program Evaluation Office, n.d. [ca Sep 24, 1957]; and MAAG Laos Briefing, Laos: Pawn of Destiny, August 1961.

(U) Statistics and a short narrative of air operations in Laos are set forth in two monthly Pacific Air Forces publications: *Effects of Air Operations, Southeast Asia*; and *Summary of Air Operations, Southeast Asia.* The *PACAF Weekly Intelligence Digest* contributes helpful information on the war. A PACAF special study, *Target Barrel Roll, March-October 1969*, treats Operations Rain Dance and About Face. Another good source of information is the *Seventh Air Force Weekly Air Intelligence Summary.*

(U) Special studies of the Center for Air Force History and of USAF commands have been helpful in preparing the present volume. These are listed in Jacob Neufeld, *et al, Guide to Air Force Historical Literature, 1943-1983* (Office of Air Force History, 1985). Missing from this catalog is an important study, *USAF Communications and Air Traffic Control Operations in Southeast Asia, 1960-1973* (Air Force Communications Service, 1976). A valuable chronicle of the war, edited by Carl Berger, is *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: An Illustrated Account* (Office of Air Force History, 1977).

(U) The authors also interviewed participants in the war, and frequently consulted with historians of the Office of Air Force History who were working on volumes in the United States Air Force in Southeast Asia series.

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(U) **The titles of all sources listed below are unclassified.**

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